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ZANE GREY'S WESTERN MAGAZINE

DELL

TO RIDE THE RIVER WITH BY WILLIAM MACLEOD RAINE (MAGAZINE ABRIDGMENT)

"I don't think Mr. Gray is a rustler!"

To Ride the River With, Chap. 19

ZANE GREY'S WESTERN MAGAZINE

Vol. 3, No. 11—January, 1950

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A MAN *can't very well stand aside when a drunken roisterer's six-gun frolicking endangers the life of a girl, especially one as slim and lovely and vivacious as Ruth Chiswick. So Jeff Gray, newly arrived in the tough little frontier town of Tail Holt, deals himself in, though ordinarily he would have avoided any ruckus involving a woman as he would the plague. He soon finds that Lee Chiswick, the girl's father and leader of the cattlemen, and Sherm Howard, gross but nimble-minded chief of the lawless forces centering in Tail Holt, are heading for a showdown. In such a conflict the middle is a dangerous position to hold, but the middle is just where Jeff Gray seems determined to be. Ruth Chiswick, having convinced herself that she is in love with Sherm Howard's handsome, flashy son, nearly sacrifices her future in a desperate attempt to avert the threatened struggle, but the advent of the crook-nosed, redheaded Gray, regarded by both sides as a fugitive from Texas justice, deflects her from her purpose. She is strongly attracted to this cool, competent stranger, but though she strikes a corresponding spark from him he resolutely maintains a calculated hostility toward her. Realizing that her undisciplined impulsiveness annoys him, Ruth is pleased when he shows what she hopes are his true colors by siding her brother in a tight, but dismayed when it seems that he is working hand in glove with her father's worst enemy. To Sherm Howard a hunted man whom he can use, to Lee Chiswick alternately a deadly menace and a strange benefactor, to Ruth an irritant as well as the essence of magnetic virility, to everyone else a pure puzzle, Jeff Gray rides his own trail, with trouble his constant companion. But when the forces under Lee Chiswick and Sherm Howard meet head on and six-shooters roar in a fighting, flaming climax, Jeff Gray proves that his gun skill is a factor for right and justice and Tail Holt finds that he is a man "To Ride the River With."*

Coming in the February issue of ZANE GREY'S WESTERN MAGAZINE:

"NEVADA"

A magazine abridgment of Zane Grey's novel of a fighting man, a beautiful girl, and a hard-bitten outlaw gang.

Also: ***SADDLE BUM,*** **a moving novelette by George C. Appell**

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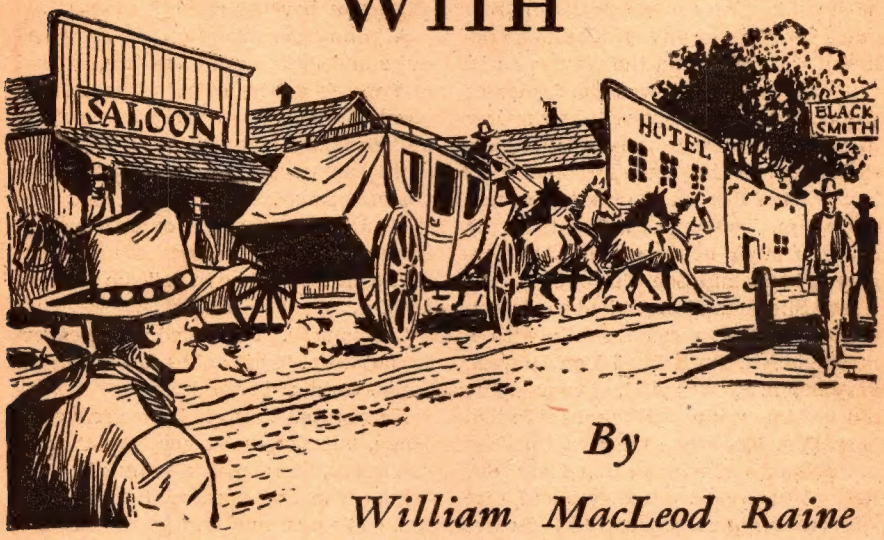
FAIR TRADE, **a mountain-man tale by Bill Gulick**

ON SALE ABOUT JANUARY 2

TO RIDE THE RIVER WITH



By

William MacLeod Raine

CHAPTER ONE

Ruth Looks for a Way Out

SUN RAYS were streaming through the mesquite when Ruth rode out of the arroyo. Scarfs of heat already radiated from the ground, but the wind touching the girl's cheek still had a cool freshness.

Scarlet blossoms topped a hundred ocotillos which stood up like flagpoles. After the spring rains the country had greened up. The banners of light pouring across the valley toward the misty canyons washed the harsh gauntness from the plains.

Ruth Chiswick drew a deep breath, almost a sigh. The desert could show its teeth grimly, but it could be poignantly lovely too. This was her country.

Ruth was greatly worried. At the parting of the ways, she did not know what to do. Her problems were two, though they merged into one. That her father lived in constant danger from the lawless rustlers of Tail Holt she knew. He took no precautions. Instead of biding his time until he could crush them he bluntly defied and threatened. Some day he would be dry-gulched from the brush. His saddled horse would come home without a rider. The long record he had made as a fighting frontier officer made retreat impossible for him.

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Though at times there was stormy conflict between father and daughter, the tie which bound them together was very close. To Ruth the peril in which he stood had become an obsession. She must save him at any cost, and she believed she had found the way to do it.

Sherman Howard was the leader of the outlaws, yet kept within the law himself as far as she knew. If he gave the word for his men to keep their hands off L C stock the rustlers would obey him. No longer would there be cause of strife between these light-fingered riders and Lee Chiswick.

And Sherman Howard had a son who was a dark, handsome youth with a merry laugh. Ruth liked Lou Howard very much. He was wild, of course. She did not know him well, and there had been moments when there had flashed out evidence of moral callousness. But he had given her to understand that she was the one woman with influence enough to keep him straight, and she was young enough to be attracted by the thought of snatching so good-looking a brand from the burning.

She had flirted with a lot of boys in an innocent way, but she did not know anything about love—unless the emotion she felt for Lou Howard came under that category. At times a strange feeling flooded her, almost religious in its intensity, that she had been appointed to save her father by marrying this young man. It would have to be an elopement. Afterward Lee Chiswick and Sherman Howard would shake hands. Lou had told her he could manage his father. She wished she was sure she loved him.

The last time they had met he had kissed her. Indignantly she had pushed him away, but afterward—thinking of that ardent embrace alone in her room—she knew her indignation had been a fraud. She had been chary of favors to boys. None of them had ever kissed her like that, with a fire which had stirred in her reluctant response.

A young man rode out of the mesquite and flung up a hand in greeting. She watched him as he cantered forward, flung himself from the saddle, and strode to meet her. A queer little thrill ran through her, and after it a tremor of fear.

"I was afraid you wouldn't come," he said.

"I said I would be here," she reminded him.

"So you did." He looked at her eagerly, boyishly. "Is it going to be yes?"

She nodded. "I think so."

He reached up to help her from the horse, but she shook her head. "No, I can't stay, more than a minute."

"You can rest yore saddle that minute, can't you, honey?"

The girl knew what he wanted, to take her in his arms and make love to her. She discovered that she did not want him to do that—not yet, at least.

"No. I slipped away, and I have to get back. They'll miss me." She asked abruptly, a wave of color in her cheeks, "Are you sure you still—want me?"

"Of course I do." He frowned up at her, irritated. He had ridden thirty miles to meet her and she held him at arm's length. "But get down and let us talk, Ruth. If we're going to get married—"

"I don't know you, and you don't know me," she interrupted.

"Course I know you," he denied. "You're the prettiest girl in the county. I know all about you, and you know about me. I'm wild about you."

She slipped from the saddle and stood beside him. He took her in his arms and

she submitted, withholding herself. Presently she drew back from his embrace. That he was dissatisfied with her lack of response she knew.

"Be patient with me—at first," she begged. "I'm worried, Lou. I don't know whether what we are going to do is right. I—I—I'm scared."

Promises poured out of him. He would make her happy. He would reconcile their fathers. There would no longer be war on the range. Forgetting all the other girls, he would make her the best husband in the territory. All she had to do was to trust him and he would fix it.

"It's for life," she told him in a low voice. "If we're making a mistake—"

"We aren't," he interrupted. "I'll go straight and treat you like a princess. Don't you worry!"

Yet she did worry, even as they made the arrangements for the elopement. The weight was still in her breast as she rode back up the arroyo. The sun was hot in the coppery sky. From the far canyons the mist had vanished. Harsh and forbidding stretched the grim desert, all its sharp teeth showing.

Chapter Two

"Town Kinda Quiet"

INTO Tail Holt, near the close of a hot day, rode a man on a long-barreled roan. The gelding jiggled down the main street at a road gait, but it was clear that many miles of travel lay behind. Stains of dust and sweat streaked the face of the man and the flanks of the horse.

The rider dismounted at a store which carried on the false front a sign —*Yell Sanger, General Merchandise.* He dropped the reins at a hitch rack and looked up and down the street to orient himself. Through the hazy amber light of late afternoon he saw Tail Holt drowse in a coma of sunshine. A man was crossing the street from one saloon to another. Otherwise the place appeared to be deserted except for half a dozen cow ponies drooping at the hitch rack of Curt Dubbs' Golden Nugget saloon and gambling-house.

Four saloons, a blacksmith's shop, another general store, a Chinese restaurant, a shoemaker's cubby hole, and a public corral were checked off by the stranger. Leisurely he turned and walked with trailing spurs into Sanger's store.

In addition to Sanger, who was a baldheaded little fellow with black gimlet eyes, two cowboys were in the place. They were lounging against a counter. Conversation ceased at the entrance of the newcomer. All three gazed at him.

They saw a crook-nosed man of middle size with a leathery brown face in which were set light gray eyes from the corners of which radiated many tiny wrinkles. He might be thirty years old, perhaps a year or two less. His movements had a kind of rippling ease and he carried himself with an assurance almost insolent. When he took off his dusty hat he showed a thick head of hair burned sorrel by a thousand untempered suns. He wore shiny leathers and high-heeled boots, an open vest, no coat. A gun hung low on his thigh, well forward.

From a throat caked with alkali dust the traveler said hoarsely, "Tomato airtight."

Sanger slashed open a can with a hatchet. "Some hot on the desert," the storekeeper suggested.

The crook-nosed man drank the juice from the can, then fished out a tomato. "Some," he assented. "I got to thinkin' if Tail Holt was any farther off it must be near somewhere."

Experimentally, one of the cowboys murmured, "You come quite a ways?"

The crook-nosed man looked at him. "Yes, sir, hot and dry," he drawled, after shifting his gaze to Sanger.

"That's right," the second cowboy agreed. He was a long-legged man with a lank lower jaw.

"Sure is," his companion said. "Well, I'll be moseyin', Mile High."

"*Yo tambien*, Sid," the tall man concurred promptly, unwinding to his full height. "I'll take a plug of Horse Shoe, Sanger." He followed Sid from the building.

"Town kinda quiet," the stranger said.

"Liable to liven up later," Sanger told him.

From where he sat on a counter the man with the sorreltop could see the two cowboys looking at his horse. Words drifted to him.

"Double cinch—Texas man," Mile High hazarded.

"Yep. No tenderfoot."

They bowlegged across the road to the Golden Nugget.

"Tail Holt takes notice of a stranger," the newcomer mentioned dryly.

Sanger did not answer. His small black eyes were taking in with a vast surprise two people who had come into the store.

"Evening, Miss Chiswick—Lou," he greeted them.

The man he had called Lou drew the storekeeper aside for a whispered conference. He was wearing new corduroys, fancy top boots, expensive sombrero, and a purple silk shirt around the neck of which was tied loosely a polka dot bandanna. On his dark, handsome face there was just now a sulky look. In one keen glance the crook-nosed man sized him up as a showy, raffish fellow with no bottom.

The girl held a greater interest. She had, he guessed, an exciting personality. In her dark, stormy eyes was the threat of passion. That she was spoiled he had no doubt. There was pride in the lift of the lovely little head above the young, slim, graceful body.

A snatch of the low-voiced conversation came to the stranger.

". . . have Spicer meet us at Ma Presnall's boarding-house and do the job . . . want to get to Tough Nut before night."

Gretna Green business, of course. Bad medicine for the girl. Probably she was an undisciplined little devil, but she was too fine of grain for the man with whom she was eloping.

"Are you expecting to spend the day here?" she asked her companion.

"I'm fixing things up with Sanger, Ruth," the young man answered irritably. "Can't do it any faster."

The girl did not reply. She brushed back impatiently a tendril that had escaped from the soft waves of dark hair disordered by her long ride.

A fusillade of shots came from the street. The three men moved swiftly to the door. A rider was galloping down the dusty road, revolver in hand, waving a hat in the air.

"Hi-yi! Whoopee! Git outa the way of Wild Jim Pender," he yelled.

"Pender on a drunk again," Sanger said. "He's a terror when he has tanglefoot aboard. He's headin' back down the street—Lordee, he's coming in!"

"Hunt cover, Ruth," her young man shouted, and vaulted over a counter.

"Back here. Quick."

An arm of the stranger went round the waist of the girl, swept her up the store, and flung her down behind some sacks of potatoes.

The drunken man drove his horse into the store.

" 'Lo, Sanger, you old son-of-a-vinegaroon, where are you? I want cartridges. *Pronto.*"

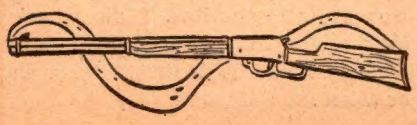
From under the counter where he lay the storekeeper did not announce his presence. A crook-nosed man with rusty hair stood beside some sacks filled with potatoes.

"Who in Mexico are you, Sorreltop?" demanded Pender. "Where's that baldheaded galoot Sanger?"

He did not wait for an answer. In his hands was a rifle drawn from its place beside the saddle. Raising it, he drummed holes in the tinware suspended from the wall. A .44 had jumped to the hand of the man beside the potatoes, but though the weapon covered the drunken fool it was not fired.

The frightened horse went into the air and as it came down jammed the rider's leg against the counter. The animal whirled, flung Pender from the saddle, and dashed wildly out of the store. Scrambling to his feet, the drink-crazed man snatched up the rifle and followed his mount. He took a shot at the gelding as it went racing up the street in a cloud of dust, limped across to the cow ponies in front of the Golden Nugget, selected one, mounted, and rode away with a wild yell.

Sanger cautiously showed the top of his bald head above the counter.



"Fireworks over," drawled the crook-nosed man, and his weapon vanished from sight. He gave the girl a hand to help her up from where he had flung her. "You were sure right, Mr. Sanger. You know yore town. It livened up like you promised."

Ruth Chiswick stood beside him, breathing a little faster than usual, her cheeks still pale. The man with whom she was eloping came round the corner of the counter. He was carrying a revolver.

"I would sure have got that bird if I hadn't seen he didn't mean business," Lou Howard boasted.

Ruth looked at him, scorn in her eyes.

"Watching him through a knothole, maybe," the stranger suggested lazily.

The anger of the younger man flared up. "What's it to you, fellow?" he demanded hotly. "If you claim that—"

"I don't claim a thing, except that you are sure a good vaulter and quick on yore feet."

"I didn't see you do so much."

"You nor nobody else," the stranger agreed. "I hunted cover, like you advised the young lady."

Lou turned to Ruth. "Let's get out of here," he said sulkily. "Sanger is going to send Spicer down to Ma Presnall's."

The crook-nosed man remembered having seen a sign on the street mentioning that Al Spicer was a justice of the peace.

In a low voice Ruth said, "I'd like to speak with you alone, Lou."

"Sure," he replied. "On the way to the hotel."

"No. At the back of the store."

He followed her reluctantly toward the small boxed-in office. The girl talked, fast and low. She seemed to be both

urging and pleading.

An angry oath ripped into her words. "Have you gone crazy?" Howard demanded, raising his voice. "Think you can make a fool of me?"

She spoke again, trying to calm him, but he beat down her talk, anger high in his manner.

"Not for a minute. You've got to go through with this. I won't have it any other way."

"Listen, Lou," she begged, and now even her words came to the other men in the store. "It would never do—never. I must have been crazy when I thought it would. I wasn't sure then, but I know now."

"But why—why? What have I done for you to jilt me now?" he urged stormily.

"I'm not jilting you." She flung out a little gesture that asked for understanding. "Can't you see I've found out in time to save us both?"

"Save us from what?" he demanded, exasperated. "What's it all about? Yesterday nothing would do but we had to run away."

"Yesterday I was a fool," she said bitterly.

He would not listen. "You can't do this crazy thing. You've compromised yourself. Don't you see it, you little idiot? Folks will talk about you. They'll say—"

Ruth began to lose patience. "Never mind what they'll say. I've made up my mind. I'm going home."

"You got no right to treat me that way. I'm not going to stand for it."

"I'm sorry, but be sensible, Lou. Be glad I've found out in time."

He flung a name at her. She looked at him for a moment, then turned and walked up the store.

"My name is Ruth Chiswick," she told the man with the rusty hair. "I'm much obliged to you for looking after me."

"Nothing at all, Miss. I'm a stranger here—name, Jeff Gray."

Lou Howard joined them and broke in curtly, speaking to Ruth. "Let's get out where we can be alone and talk this over."

"I've nothing more to say to you," she said, and there was the sting of a lash in the low voice.

"Anyhow, I'll have to take you home," Howard snapped.

"No, you won't take me home," she said, her tone cool and hard. "You won't ever take me anywhere again."

Ruth turned to walk from the store, but instead of doing so stood rigid, her eyes fixed on two men riding down the street. To Howard she said, over her shoulder, "You'd better light out; my father is here."

The young man took one look at the dismounting men. "Maybe I had better, to keep from having trouble with him," he faltered.

He left by the side door. The girl did not even notice him go.

"I don't see how Father could have found out already," she said, frowning in thought. "But that doesn't matter. I'll go meet him."

Sanger spoke. "They've tied at the hitch rack and are going into the Golden Nugget. It's his foreman Dan Brand with him."

Ruth continued to frown. "What are they going in there for? He never does, even when he comes to Tail Holt. The men who patronize it are his enemies." She turned to Gray, and he noticed she was white to the lips. "Unless he is—looking for trouble."

"Why would he do that?" the stranger asked.

"He must have heard about me and gone in to face Sherm Howard down. I'll have to get him out of there. I—I'll go in after him."

Gray shook his head. He heard himself, to his own surprise, offering to do her errand.

"Don't—don't let them hurt Father," she begged.

"You'll find it's all right," he assured her. "Likely he has just gone in on business with someone."

"No," she denied. "Hurry, please. I'll be here when he comes. Tell him so."

Gray walked across the road into the gambling-house.

Chapter Three

Finished Business

A BIG fat heavy-shouldered man who was playing solitaire lifted his head as Sid and Mile High came into the Golden Nugget. He beckoned them to him.

"What is all the shootin' about?" he asked.

"Jim Pender on one of his toots," Sid replied. "Wants to clean up the town again, Sherm."

Sherman Howard frowned down at the table and shifted a queen. "He'll go just so far, that bird."

A man at the poker table, a tall broad-shouldered fellow with black curly hair, said significantly, "He's here only for a short visit."

"I reckon you're shoutin', Curly," agreed Mile High. He mentioned, in a low voice, news that might or might not be important. "Stranger in our midst."

"Where?" asked Curly.

"Over at Sanger's. Drapped in on a big roan that has been rode far."

"What kind of a guy?" inquired Howard.

"Redheaded. Tough as they come. Wears his gun low."

Howard made a sign and a man strolled over from the faro table. He was a slim, hard-eyed young fellow sporting a fancy silk bandanna tied loosely round his neck. The name he went under was Morgan Norris. He was known to be a killer.

"Stranger over at Sanger's, Morg," the solitaire player said. "Might stroll over and size him up."

Into the Golden Nugget walked two men. Their entrance created a stir, as a breath of wind does in a field of grain. Out of the corner of his mouth Curly murmured, "Look who's here." Interest in the games momentarily diminished. The bartender stopped polishing a glass.

The men who had just walked into the gambling-house had the stamp of their calling written on every crease of their dusty clothes, on every wrinkle of their weatherbeaten faces. Both were big men who had taken on the solidity that comes with years.

Unless his salient close-shut jaw, his steady, keen blue eyes, gave false witness, the older man was one of dominant will, one who would fight for his rights. His companion was a barrel-chested fellow of great physical strength. On his tanned open face there was the hint of a smile, not unfriendly, as if he offered it to mitigate the hostility of his chief.

A thin satirical smile rested on the face of Sherman Howard. He leaned back in his chair, opaque eyes fastened on the older of the newcomers.

"Nice to have you drop in on us, Lee. You don't often get around Tail Holt

way. We sure feel honored." He nodded at the younger man. "You too, Brand. Both welcome as the flowers in May. Peter, take the orders. The house is drinking on me."

"I don't drink with you or any of your crowd, Howard," said Lee Chiswick harshly. "I'm here strictly for business."

Through the swing doors a man dropped into the Golden Nugget. He was the stranger who had given his name as Jeff Gray.

"Tail Holt will welcome yore business, Lee. You have always been cash on the barrelhead," Howard told the cattleman blandly, ignoring the insult.

"I came to serve notice that anyone who steals my stock from now on will do so at his own risk," Chiswick answered bluntly. "I've given my men orders to shoot rustlers at sight."

A tense silence followed the words of the cattleman, one pregnant with peril. Gray's gaze swept the room. Unless rumor lied, three-fourths of these men present must be cattle rustlers. An organization, probably a loose one, bound them together. Tail Holt was their headquarters. The center of a rough country, from which unknown crooked trails led to points even more remote, this was a No Man's Land where the law ventured timidly and apologetically.

Instinctively Gray knew that half a dozen men were waiting for their cue. Howard gave it to them.

"That's fine," he said with suave mockery. "Sooner we get rid of scalawags of that kind the better."

"You can pass the word that any I catch will be hanged to the nearest live oak," Chiswick said flatly.

Morgan Norris asked a question, his eyes narrowed, his voice low. "Having

anyone particular in mind, Mr. Chiswick?"

"Meaning anyone the shoe fits," Howard answered for the cattleman. "And I don't reckon that is anybody present, Morg. If there is any way we can help Mr. Chiswick we will all be glad to do so. Am I right, boys?"

"Sure you're right, Sherm," agreed Curly Connor heartily. "If you can use me, Mr. Chiswick, I'm much at yore service."

"Don't want your help," Chiswick flung out bitterly. "I'll look out for my own stuff and find out whether an honest man has a chance against a pack of thieves. What I'm here to tell you is that from now on I'll be sheriff, judge, and hangman on the L C Range."

Again Gray's glance swept the room. This was fighting talk, straight from the shoulder. There were fifteen or sixteen present, all hard-bitten sons of the frontier.

Dan Brand, foreman of the L C outfit, poured oil on the roiled waters. "Don't get us wrong, boys. We're not here to start trouble but to stop it. This steal is gettin' so big the L C has got to bust it up or go broke. We don't claim we know who is doing this rustling. If we did, our job would be easy."

"We don't know, but we can guess," Chiswick cut in.

"Out loud?" Norris asked, his eyes slits of menace.

"Not out loud," Brand said quickly. "Don't push on yore reins, Morg. We

dropped in to ask you boys to spread the word that we're on the prod. If you meet some bird who looks like he might be a dirty cow thief warn him to keep his iron off our stock if he wants to stay healthy. Fair enough, isn't it?"

"Fair enough," Howard repeated with unctuous heartiness.

The swing doors of the gambling-hall burst wide open. A wild yell brought everybody in the room to attention. Excitedly a horse did a nervous dance on the floor. Its flushed rider waved a rifle about recklessly.

"Way for Wild Jim Pender," the drunken man shouted.

"Get out of here, you fool," Curly ordered.

"My night to howl," Pender exulted. "Me, I'm a wild wolf from the Chiricahuas."

To emphasize the point, or else by accident, a bullet from his rifle plowed into the ceiling.

Half a dozen revolvers roared together. Pender pitched from the saddle like a sack of meal. He struck the floor in a crumpled heap, rolled over, and lay motionless.

Norris thrust his smoking weapon back into its scabbard and caught the bridle of the rearing horse. Someone else ran forward to assist him. The two men got the frightened animal out of the place.

Sherman Howard gave a curt order. "Get the coroner, Sid."

Nobody paid any attention to the body on the floor. The games were resumed. Sounds of voices, the rattle of chips, the spinning of the roulette wheel filled the room. Wild Jim Pender's adventure was finished business.

"I said that bird was here for a short visit," Curly mentioned. "Had his nerve to come in on my horse."

"Never was anything but a false alarm," Norris said, with a shrug of his shoulders. "Thought he was the big auger because he killed Bud Henry when he wasn't lookin' for it. Good riddance, I-say."

The players in the poker game started a kitty from the jack pots to pay for the funeral expenses of the deceased.

"Didn't amount to a hill of beans but we got to plant him proper," one of them said.

Chapter Four

Chiswick Offers a Reward

THE cowboy Sid stood in the doorway of the store. "Job for you, Sanger," he said. "Fellow bumped off in the Golden Nugget."

Jeff Gray shouldered past him toward the white-faced girl leaning against the counter. "It's all right, Miss Chiswick," the redheaded man told her cheerfully. "Nobody hurt but Pender."

Ruth relaxed limply as the blood poured back into her frozen heart. "I thought—I was afraid—"

"Help me carry this stretcher, Sid," requested Sanger. He was coroner and undertaker. In Tail Holt the first of these positions was honorary, but the other was no sinecure.

"Did you tell my father I am here?" Ruth asked.

"Haven't had a chance yet," Gray answered. The other two men were leaving with the stretcher. He continued, lowering his voice, "Mr. Chiswick came to town about some rustling."

"And doesn't know about—me?"

"I couldn't say."

"What is he doing in the Golden Nugget?"

"Serving notice that he is on the warpath against rustlers."

The eyes of the girl opened wide. "To that gang in there?"

"Looked to me like some of them were sulky about it," he conceded. "Lucky for him Pender picked that time to cut loose his wolf. The boys got the finger itch out of their systems. I reckon it's going to be all right now. Howard seems to be the big boss and he is making peace talk."

"Father is so bull-headed."

"This young Howard—any kin to Sherm Howard?"

A flag of color fluttered in her cheeks, but the dark eyes held steadily to his. "Son," she said. Then, sharply: "Why do you ask?"

"If you aim to tell yore father about this little fling, maybe you had better get him out of town first," he suggested.

There was a slurring drawl in his speech that stirred anger in her. Clearly he disapproved of what she had done.

"I'm grateful to you for your advice, sir, and I'm sure Father will be," she said.

He disregarded her jeer. "Bullheaded was the word you used," he went on evenly. "It suits Lee Chiswick fine. When Pender busted into the Golden Nugget yore father was reading the riot act to a dozen scalawags waiting for the signal to cut loose at him."

"Whose signal?" she asked.

"Seemed to be Sherm Howard's say-so. Get me right. I'm playing my own hand, and I don't give a cuss whether you smile or snap. I'll tell the old man his dear daughter is here, and you can feed him any story you've a mind to, at any time. If he goes back across the road and gets rubbed out, it is none of my business."

"I'm not ashamed of what I've done," she said, bridling.

"That's nice. Tell him you came to town to buy a paper of pins."

"I'll do as I please about that," she answered resentfully.

"Not news," he drawled, his hard gaze challenging her, then yielded to an impulse to attack her pride. "He ought to give you a good quirting and put you to bed."

"Perhaps you'd better tell him so," she flared.

"Not interested enough." He shrugged his shoulders. "Spoiled brats don't mean anything to me."

"You're impudent."

"Am I?" He turned away, insolently indifferent. The girl wanted to call him back, to lash out at him with pelting words that would sting, but she was aware that nothing she could say would penetrate his impassivity.

Gray walked back into the gambling-hall.

Sanger had the floor. "Who did this, Curly?" he asked.

Curly pushed a hand through his black hair. "Couldn't tell you for sure, Yell. Half a dozen of us took a crack at him. He rode in asking for trouble and got it. Blazed away with his rifle and handed in his checks *pronto*. Maybe you better make yore verdict read 'committed suicide while temporarily insane.'"

Norris volunteered information, slanting a sneer at Chiswick. "No objections anywhere, I reckon. We can be bullied just so far."

"No objections from me," Sanger agreed. "He rode into my store crazy drunk and ruined about ten dollars'

worth of hardware. This gent was there when he shot up my place."

"He was all primed for a killing, I would say," Gray testified.

"Pender came in on my horse Black Diamond, so if you want to make the killing more legal you can claim he was a horse thief," Curly suggested humorously.

"Or self-defense," Sanger amended seriously.

"Who the hell cares how legal it was?" Norris said. "No fourflusher can come in here and hurrah me."

"You don't need to be carrying a chip on yore shoulder, Morg," Howard said, with a warning glance. "If there is rustling going on we all want to back up Lee."

"Did you say *if* there was any rustling?" Chiswick inquired, harsh irony in his voice.

Howard laughed without mirth. "You're hard to please, Chiswick. I don't pick my words like a professor. If you're not on the prod, as Brand claims, you sure have a funny way of being pleasant."

"Did I say I was aiming to be pleasant?" The cattleman let his hard gaze shift from Norris to Howard. "Someone ran off a bunch of fifty of my cows last night. If you expect me to grin and say, 'Help yourselves, boys,' you can have another guess. I'm going to fight."

"When a bull gets to pawing the ground he most generally gets accommodated," Norris insisted, not shifting his narrowed gaze from the owner of the L C.

"Shut up, Morg," interposed Curly affably. "Can't expect a man to sit quiet while he is being stole blind. Tell you what, boys. Some of us will be heading into the hills soon. We'll keep our eyes skinned. Like as not some of us will spot this bunch of L C stuff."

"I wouldn't wonder if some of you did," Chiswick said bluntly.

"We might even run into the sons of guns who are driving the longhorns away," Mile High said cheerfully.

"I'll pay five hundred dollars cash for evidence proving any man guilty," announced Chiswick. "And I'll never tell the name of my informant."

The cattleman turned to leave the saloon. Gray stopped him with a gesture. "Just a moment, Mr. Chiswick."

"What you want?" the ranchman asked.

Gray lowered his voice. "There's a young lady over at Sanger's who says she is yore daughter. She would like to see you right off."

"My daughter? What's she doing here?"

"Better ask her."

The redheaded man turned to the bar and ordered a beer. Chiswick and his foreman walked out of the place.

Out of the corner of his mouth Mile High said to his chief, "That's the guy I was telling you about."

Howard nodded. He observed that Curly was sauntering to the bar. So was Norris.

The big black-haired man gave an order to the bartender. "A Curly special."

Selecting a bottle, the man in the white apron pushed it across the top of the bar. Curly poured a drink and tossed it down his throat.

"Hot enough to melt the tallow off'n a guy taking a long ride," he said amiably to the stranger.

"Sure is," agreed Gray.

"Expect you're spittin' cotton."

"I can stand a beer."

"In the cattle business?"

"More or less. At loose ends right

now. Kinda lookin' around."

"My name is Connor," said Curly. "This is Mr. Norris."

"Glad to meet you. I'm Jeff Gray. A stranger in these parts."

Norris rolled a cigarette. "Tough Nut is a good town," he said. "Booming these days. Mines are doing fine. Plenty of money there."

"I'm not a miner," Gray told him, recognizing the invitation to move on but disregarding it. "Fact is, I'm not much of a town man anyhow, except when I drift in to blow my savings. I've been in the cow business all my life."

"In Texas?" Norris asked with a casual manner.

"Here and there."

"Been dry in West Texas for quite a spell, I read," Curly volunteered.

"So the papers claim."

Norris strolled across to Howard. "This sorreltop is on the dodge, looks to me," he said. "Mighty careful to give no information. Here's Curly bringing him over now."

After introductions were finished, Curly made a comment on previous business to Howard.

"Old man Chiswick's manners don't improve with age."

"You're right." Howard laughed a little. "Likely those cows just strayed. Lee's hot-headed, like he always was."

"He came in here to ride us," Norris said sullenly. "What's the idea of tellin' us to lay off him, Sherm?"

"Lee is one of the leading citizens of this part of the country, Morg. Why should we have trouble with him because he is annoyed at losing his stuff?"

"Chiswick is all right, Morg," Curly added carelessly. "I'd kick too, like a bay steer, if my cows were being run off."

"That's right," Mile High agreed.

Chapter Five

Supper at Charley Wong's

LEE CHISWICK caught sight of his daughter standing in front of Sanger's store and strode across the street to her.

"What are you doing here, Ruth?" he demanded forcefully.

Evading his question, she said, "I've been worried about you."

"What for?"

"When I heard the shooting, over in the Golden Nugget, I thought—"

The cattleman spoke more gently. "You knew I was there?"

"Yes. I saw you and Dan go in. I hadn't time to stop you."

"Stop me?" He frowned. "I'm not so feeble I need a girl to look after my doings."

Already Chiswick had jumped to the conclusion that she had followed him to town because she was afraid he would get into trouble with the rustler group. She must have overheard him and Dan Brand discussing the loss of this last bunch of stock.

"I know, but—you're so bullheaded, Father."

"Nothing of the kind," he protested hotly.

"When all those guns roared—"

"They weren't shooting at me, honey." His mind harked back to the reproof she needed. "You have no business coming to town—not to Tail Holt. We stay away from this place. You know that."

"*You* didn't."

"Dad-gum it, girl, I'm your father. You don't have to tell me what all I can and can't do." He slammed his fist

down into the palm of the other hand. "You act like you rule the roost. Well, you don't. Understand?"

"Yes," she said, with more humility than was customary, since her mind was still full of the crazy thing she had done.

"You're too doggoned impulsive."

"And you are not?" she ventured with a faint smile.

"I reckon you come by it honestly. That's not the point. A young lady has got to behave different from a man. Course I understand you were worried about me, honey, but when I get so I can't run my own business I'll ask you for help. Till then you stay home and 'tend to yore knitting."

"A good woman's place is in the home," Ruth recited glibly, setting her mouth to a prim expression. "Her hallowed influence radiates such a —"

Lee grinned. "I ought to have wore you to a frazzle with a hickory limb when you was little instead of letting you have your own way," he interrupted. "One of these days you'll get into trouble because you haven't been disciplined."

"I might," she admitted simply.

Ruth was still thinking of her escapade with Lou Howard. She could not understand how it had ever gone so far. She knew now she did not love him, never had. That she had not seen through his shallow weakness earlier hurt her pride.

"We'll go over to Charley Wong's restaurant for supper," Lee Chiswick said. "Dan is waiting for us over there."

At the back of the restaurant they found a bucket of water, a tin pan, a thin piece of dirty soap, and a roller towel much the worse for use.

The cattleman called Wong. "This towel has half of Arizona on it, Charley. Bring a new one—and another piece of soap."

The Chinese grinned. "Velly good," he said.

Inside the restaurant Dan Brand was waiting at a table in a corner. Across the aisle from him sat Gray.

Ruth touched the cattleman on the arm by way of calling his attention. "This is Mr. Gray, Father. When that drunk man came shooting into Sanger's store he looked after me."

"Looked after you—how?"

"Pushed me back of some sacks of potatoes and stood in front of me."

Chiswick offered his hand. "Glad to meet you, Mr. Gray. I reckon my daughter has thanked you, but I'll do it again."

"Nothing worth mentioning what I did, but she thanked me proper," the crook-nosed man said dryly.

"Since you haven't eaten yet, won't you join us?" the cattleman invited.

Gray moved to the other table.

"My foreman, Dan Brand," Chiswick introduced. "Dan, this is Mr. Gray."

The two men shook hands, estimating one another with their eyes. Chiswick motioned Gray to the vacant chair beside his daughter.

"Looks like a country of small ranches," Gray said presently.

"Yes," Chiswick confirmed. "Plenty rough in these hills. Cut up by gulches and canyons where nesters have settled."

"Your ranch is lower down?"

"Yes. Runs up from the Sweet Spring Valley into the hills."

"From what I heard at the Golden Nugget I gather the L C is a big outfit."

"My brand is on a lot of stock—or was," the cattleman said grimly.

"Still is," Brand amended.

"I reckon." Anger flamed in Chis-

wick's tanned face. "Won't be long unless we can stop this big steal that is going on. These rustlers used to raid across the line into Old Mexico and run off herds from the big ranches there. That was fine, but when the Mexicans took to killing off the thieves it wasn't so good. Since then the brave boys have taken to stealing from us ranchmen in the neighborhood. A few of them will have to be strung up as a warning."

"Better not talk," advised Brand in a low voice.

"Why shouldn't I talk?" Chiswick demanded. "This is a free country, and I've never yet seen the color of the scoundrel's hair that could keep me from saying my mind."

"You don't mean red particularly, do you, Father?" Ruth asked, slanting impudent eyes at Gray.

The cattleman smiled ruefully. "Figure of speech, Mr. Gray. No, I don't mean red." He turned to his daughter. "You little minx."

"None of my business, Mr. Chiswick," Gray said bluntly. "But what Mr. Brand says is good medicine. Why talk any more? You've said yore little piece. I am of opinion that the chucklehead who rode in and got filled with lead did you a considerable service."

"His chunk sure went out sudden," Brand commented. "I wouldn't say you're not right, Mr. Gray. While Lee was on the prod I didn't feel anyways lead-immune myself. They're not bad boys, in a way of speaking, but they are some quick on the trigger."

"No, they're not bad," Chiswick replied scornfully. "Practically all of them are thieves, and some are killers, and a few have robbed trains and stages. Maybe forty per cent of them have shot down Mexican *vaqueros* who were defending their masters' herd. But what is a Mexican here and there? Remember the Alamo! Yes, sir. Just a bunch of nice cowboys who take no pleasure in killing unless someone gets in the way of what they want."

Brand shrugged his shoulders and said nothing.

"Now that's off your mind, Father, we might talk of something that doesn't excite you so much. How do you like our little town, Mr. Gray?"

"This scab town is not ours," Chiswick said. "We do our business in Tough Nut. There's no place for an honest man in Tail Holt."

"If Mr. Gray thinks of settling here he might reform the community. Don't discourage him, Father," said Ruth. "Maybe he is a minister come to look the field over and finds it ripe for the harvest."

"Don't be impudent, missy," ordered Lee. "That's a fine way to talk to someone who has just done you a service."

"Mr. Gray agrees with you, Father," the girl said in a small demure voice. "He thinks I'm spoiled and ought to be whipped and sent to bed."

"He's right enough, if he did say it."

"Oh, he said it. Mr. Gray believes in speaking his mind too." The girl turned sweetly to the foreman. "Since we're taking a census, Dan, what do *you* think about it?"

"About what?"

"About my being whipped and sent to bed."

Brand chuckled. "Girl, you take the cake," he told her amiably.

"Come clean, Dan," she insisted. "This is a public discussion. To whip or not to whip."

"I haven't heard anybody do any discussing except you," Brand told her with a grin. "Anyway, I'm no eyeball-

er, Miss Ruth."

"Meaning you'd like to vote yes but are scared to go on record," Ruth charged. "Mr. Gray has the courage of his convictions. He spoke right out."

Gray decided he would have ham and eggs for supper. After Charley Wong had departed with the orders he answered Ruth in his drawling voice.

"It's a free country, as Mr. Chiswick says, and we were kinda exchanging opinions, weren't we?"

"I didn't know I had mentioned just what I thought of you," she said with light scorn.

"Not in words, Miss Chiswick." His cheerful smile mocked her. "But I got an impression of about how much you admire me."

"What's all this nonsense, Ruth?" her father asked, annoyed at this by-play of words to which he did not have the key. "You talk too much, young woman. You always do."

"Yes, sir," she said apologetically. "I must have got it from my mother's side of the family."

Brand laughed outright and tried to pretend he had swallowed some smoke from his cigar.

Chapter Six

A Gun Roars

THE summit of Mule Mountain had been a crag of fire in the sunset when they had gone into the restaurant. As they came out Ruth noticed that the crotches between the peaks were lakes of imperial blue. Soon darkness would sift down from the hills.

"We're out of Arbuckle's and baking soda," Ruth told her father. "Better get some while we're here, don't you think?"

"Yes. Enough to last us till someone can get to Tough Nut. Anything else you need?"

"I'd like some nutmegs, and a box of matches."

Chiswick asked the foreman to get Ruth's cow pony and tie it at the hitch rack with the other two. Gray walked with the father and daughter as far as Sanger's store.

"I'll be saying *adios*," he told them, and added, his ironic smile on Ruth, "Nice to have met up with you."

She said the pleasure was hers, said it very coolly, and turned into the store. The place was lit by two coal-oil lamps suspended from the ceiling. Near the rear something covered by a sheet lay on a cot.

Two customers were in the store. One was a slim, graceful, fishy-eyed man, neatly dressed, with a silk bandanna tied loosely round his brown throat. His companion called him Morg. The other she had met at a dance. He was a fine figure of a man, slender and broad-shouldered, with black curly hair that had given him his nickname. Connor, she had heard him called, and knew that Curly was his cognomen among the cowboys.

Curly spoke in a friendly way to her father and then to her. Morgan Norris scowled. He had been talking as they entered, but his words had apparently dried up. After paying for the sack of tobacco Sanger handed him, he walked past Ruth out of the store.

On his way out Curly stopped for another word with Ruth. Lee Chiswick probably considered him a bad egg, but his daughter might make allowances for the wildness of a personable young

man who had gone to school and read a few good books.

His first words carried back to a few minutes' talk they had found time for during a square dance.

"I've read *David Copperfield* again since that night at Doan's, Miss Chiswick," he began. "You were certainly right. I don't know any other book that has so many outstanding characters. They pop up all over the place. Dickens was certainly riding high, wide, and handsome when he wrote it."

"A very interesting book." Ruth took a swift look to make sure her father was busy with Sanger at the other end of the store. "Were you in the Golden Nugget when father was there this evening, Mr. Connor?"

"I did happen to be there."

"Father is hot-headed," she told him swiftly. "He may have said more than he meant to say. If you get a chance will you explain to—to any friends you may have had there—that sometimes he talks impulsively?"

"Sure I will, Miss Chiswick. I'll fix that up with them. Don't you worry."

"I won't—if you'll fix it." She slanted at him a grateful little smile.

Curly was aware of a sudden warmth flooding his body.

"Y'betcha! I'll tell the boys he didn't mean a thing— They say Dickens was writing about his own life in *David Copperfield*, Miss Chiswick. Do you know whether that is so?"

This last was for the benefit of Lee Chiswick, who was passing them with some bundles in his hands.

"I'm putting these in the saddlebags," the cattleman said gruffly.

"Yes, Father, I'll be right out," Ruth answered.

"We're starting," Chiswick growled over his shoulder.

The cattleman walked across the road to the hitch rack and began putting packages in the saddlebags of his mount. Through the deepening dusk he saw Dan Brand coming down the street leading Ruth's chestnut mare. Morgan Norris leaned against a door post at the entrance to the Golden Nugget.

The foreman fastened the chestnut with a slip knot. "Got to get some eatin' tobacco," he said, and bowlegged across the road to the store.

As Brand passed the two young people he gave Ruth a curious glance. Down at the corral where she had left her horse he had learned a bit of news.

"All set to go?" Ruth asked him.

"Soon as I get my chewing."

Curly was speaking to the girl in a low voice. She shook her head.

"No, Mr. Connor. I'm sure I am flattered, but I don't think Father would make you welcome at the L C if you rode out there."

"Not even if I dropped in kinda by chance?"

Ruth laughed. "Young men who drop in by chance don't fool him any more."

They followed Brand out of the store. Night was sweeping down over the valley. The first evening stars were pricking out. Above the door of a saloon farther down the street a lantern had been lit.

Men drifted in and out of gambling-houses. Morgan Norris was no longer in sight. He had disappeared into the Golden Nugget. Mile High and his friend Sid moved with trailing spurs to their cow ponies.

From the alley beside the Golden Nugget a flash split the darkness. The blast of a gun sounded—twice.

Lee Chiswick caught at the pommel of his saddle, at the same time dragging a revolver into sight. Ruth ran forward and slipped an arm around his waist.

"Get back, girl," he shouted with an oath.

A man came swiftly, weapon in hand. From the end of the barrel a faint trickle of smoke drifted. The man was Jeff Gray.

Ruth clung to her father, her body between him and the runner. "Don't you dare," she cried wildly. "You murderer!"

Gray stopped, abruptly, and thrust his gun back into the holster. "You don't think—" he began.

"Lemme go, you little fool," Chiswick cried, struggling fiercely to free his arms.

Two more guns roared. Dan Brand and Curly Connor had come into action against the crook-nosed man.

Gray dodged behind the horses, crossed the street at a zigzag run, his body low and crouched, and snatched up the trailing reins of his rangy roan. Without touching the stirrups, he vaulted into the saddle. The gelding whirled at a touch, rising to its hind legs. A moment later the rider went racing down the street, lying low on the saddle.

Bullets whizzed past him. He did not stop. Horse and man vanished into the night.

Chapter Seven

A Confession

IN AN incredibly short time after the firing had ceased a crowd of milling men surrounded the Chiswicks.

All the color had washed out of Ruth's face. Her arm still supported the wounded cattleman.

"Someone get a doctor," she begged.

"No doc in town," Mile High answered. "I'll ride to Tough Nut for one if you like, Miss."

Lee drew a hand across the back of his neck and looked at the stain. "Creased me," he said. "Must have knocked me dizzy with the shock. No more than skin deep."

From the outskirt of the press Morgan Norris asked a question. "Who did it?"

"That sorreltop stranger," answered Curly. "Open out a way, boys, and let Mr. Chiswick through. Better get him into the Golden Nugget."

"I'll go into Sanger's," Chiswick said. "No use making a fuss. I'm not hurt."

The broad shoulders of Dan Brand opened a path.

"Are you sure it's—not serious, Father?" Ruth asked, as soon as they had reached the store.

"Sure," Lee replied curtly. "Just a scratch. Get me water, a clean towel, and some linen to tie up my neck, Yell," he ordered.

Sherman Howard came into the store as Ruth was tying a handkerchief around her father's neck to hold the bandage in place.

He said suavely, "I wouldn't have had this happen for a thousand dollars, Lee. I've got men out on the trail after

this skunk and if they catch him we'll sure string him to a cottonwood."

"Why, the damned scalawag ate supper with us not fifteen minutes ago," Brand burst out indignantly.

"What got into him? Why did he do it?" asked Howard. "No quarrel or anything while you were eating?"

Chiswick looked at Howard. "No quarrel. He was hired to do it."

"Hired? Who by?"

"He didn't stop to tell me who his employer is."

"Says his name is Gray. Never been seen here before. Find out where he comes from and you can spot the scoundrel who sent him, Lee."

"You can ask him when your men bring him back, Howard," the cattleman said with heavy sarcasm.

"You're likely right, Lee. He was sent in to do this job."

"Sent in or sent for?" amended Chiswick.

"Anyhow, yore luck stood up fine, Lee," the foreman said in his hearty, cheerful voice. "The son of a gun good as missed you and right now he's going like a wild Neuces steer. He never will show up in this part of the country again."

"Not unless he's dragged back with a rope round his neck," Howard replied.

"Hadn't been for Miss Chiswick the fellow would have finished the job," Curly cried with enthusiasm. "I never saw anything like the way she stood between him and her father. He couldn't get in another shot."

"You and Dan drove him off, Mr. Connor," Ruth said, blushing.

"I certainly owe you thanks for your help," Chiswick said to Curly. "His bullet had knocked me silly and I couldn't do much for myself."

"Yore gun came out mighty swift, sir. I noticed that."

"We'll hit the trail," Chiswick told his foreman. "Might bring the horses across to the door."

"Do you think you're able to travel?" his daughter asked, with a worried frown.

"Why not wait till morning, Lee?" Howard said. "You'll be more comfortable at Ma Presnall's. Better play safe."

"You think some other yellow coyote will take a crack at me?" the L C owner asked bluntly, his hard gaze on Howard.

"No. I think you may be hurt worse than you figure. If you're set on going Curly will ride with you till you are clear of town, I reckon."

"Sure I will," assented Curly.

"You can't ride beside me, young fellow," Chiswick told him. "But I'll ask you to go along with my daughter till we get out of this town. You and Dan will flank her. I'll ride in front alone. If there is another murderer wants to get me here is his chance."

"The old man sure has got hell in the neck," Mile High said to Sid as they watched him leading the little procession down the street. "One of these days he'll get dry gulched sure as you're a foot high."

"I wouldn't wonder," Sid nodded. "Something about the geezer I like. He's got sand in his craw, Chiswick has."

"Y'betcha."

At the edge of the village Chiswick pulled up, thanked Curly, and sent that young man back. A quarter of a mile farther on he took a hill trail.

"It's five miles farther home this way, Father," Ruth said. "And a rough trail for night travel. With your wound—"

"I keep telling you I haven't any wound," he exclaimed. "We're going this way because it's safer. They'll think we will travel by the main road. If a trap has been laid, we'll miss it."

"Something in that," Brand agreed. "I don't reckon anybody is laying for us, but no need to take a chance."

A crowing cock was proclaiming the advent of dawn when they reached the L C Ranch.

Ruth poured her father another cup of coffee. He took it absent-mindedly, his eyes on a paper in his hand.

"Reckon I better put the date in," he said aloud, to himself. The paper was a bill of sale. It read:

This is to certify I have this day sold to Barclay Broderick one hundred and eighty (180) yearling heifers branded L C, Lazy D, and J-M, and I guarantee peaceable possession of same.

LEE CHISWICK

His daughter watched him, waiting for a favorable moment. It was the second morning after their return to the ranch, and she had made up her mind to confess now.

"Something to tell you, Father," she said.

With a pencil he wrote the date on the bill of sale. He looked up. "Yes?"

Small gleaming teeth, strong and even, bit into her upper lip. "Can we go into your office?" she asked.

He finished the coffee. Ruth followed him. She shut the door of the little room after they had entered.

The office was barely furnished with a table, a desk, and two chairs, all of them except one chair littered with papers and account books.

"Have to gather these yearlings and drive them to Tough Nut," Lee said. "We'll start tomorrow, I reckon."

Ruth plunged. "When I went to Tail Holt I didn't know you had gone there, Father," she began.

"Didn't." Chiswick's eyes came to attention. "Then why did you go?"

"I was running away to get married."

He stared at her. "Good God! Who with?"

"With Lou Howard."

He was too surprised and shocked to say anything at first.

"It wasn't his fault as much as it was mine," she went on. "I was a crazy fool. You told me to have nothing to do with him—never to speak to him. You threatened me. I liked him, and I resented having you dictate to me. We met secretly. I thought I was in love with him and slipped away to Tail Holt. We were going to be married there."

"Goddlemighty! One of those damned Howards." Lee was still too shaken to explode.

"On the way I found out I didn't care for him so much," Ruth continued. "But I was ashamed to turn back then. When that drunken man who was killed later came into Sanger's he—Lou Howard, I mean—didn't behave well. He was frightened and forgot all about me. He jumped over the counter and hid. Afterward I told him I was through—that I never wanted to see him again."

"You didn't marry him?" the cattleman said thickly.

"No. I wasn't crazy any longer."

He seized her by the shoulders, his strong fingers biting into the flesh savagely. "Girl, what more have you to tell me?" he demanded.

The color poured into her cheeks, but the eyes of the girl did not yield an iota to the fierce inquiry in his. "Nothing. Nothing at all."

"You weren't—"

"Never," she cried.

He drew a long breath and flung her from him. "My own daughter throws down on me and joins the pack of wolves tearing me down," he said bitterly.

Ruth had no answer for that. There was no use to explain to him that she had hoped to heal up the feud between him and Sherman Howard.

"It's all over," she said, trying to comfort him. "I'll never again consider marrying a man without telling you. I was a fool, but I didn't mean to join your enemies. I thought—well, never mind what I thought."

"Anybody but Sherm Howard's son," he said, almost with a groan. "The man I have hated for twenty years, the one who has always done his level best to ruin me. My only girl, the one I have—" He stopped, afraid to trust his voice.

"I'm sorry, Father. Of course it doesn't do any good to say that, but—I'd give anything if I hadn't done it."

"You threw him overboard—quit of your own accord? He didn't jilt you?" Lee asked harshly.

"No. He begged me to go on with it—said folks would give him the laugh. I'm the one to blame all the way through. I'm a flirt—and fickle. There must be something—rotten—about me. I suppose it's too late to whip it out of me."

Ruth did herself less than justice. She had been wilful, and she had flirted in an innocent way, but she was as clean as the wind-swept hills, and there was in her a deep loyalty. She could not tell her father that her love for him had played a great part in bringing about the elopement with Lou Howard.

Hopelessly he threw out a hand. "My own fault, I reckon. I spoiled you—let you run hog-wild—gave you your own way. If I'd used a quirt on you, like I did on the boys it might have been better."

Ruth knew why he had been so indulgent. She reminded him of the young wife he had lost two or three years after her birth. Lee never spoke of her, but his daughter understood that her mother had been the one love of his life.

"I took advantage of your goodness to me," Ruth agreed.

"Your brothers are boys I'm proud of—fine, steady young fellows who will do to ride the river with. I know they will be with me long as they can stand and fight. And I thought I could depend on you too, even if you are a wild colt. I didn't figure you'd walk out on me to join my worst enemy."

"I didn't do that, Father," she denied. "I would always be on your side."

"Trouble is you're a lump of conceit. You figure wrong makes right if you say so. You'd ought to go down on your knees and thank God you didn't marry this scoundrel. You would have paid for it all your life."

"Lou may be weak, Father, but I don't think he is a scoundrel."

"Any son of Sherm Howard is a scoundrel," Lee answered dogmatically. He added, in a flare of anger, "By God, I'm ashamed of myself for having a girl who would figure on marrying dirt like the Howards."

The girl thought, as she had done many a time before, how corrosive an element hatred may become in a fine character. Her father was a man of great integrity, strong, energetic, generous, swift to do good, yet this bitterness infected his life and belittled it.

"I'm ashamed of myself," Ruth said with unwonted gentleness.

Chiswick looked at her, started to speak, then turned on his heel abruptly and strode out of the room. Ruth knew why he left. Her attitude lapped at his resentment and weakened it. He did not want to forgive her yet, not while the passionate abhorrence of what she had done was still hot in him.

During the days that followed he held his friendship back from her. At times he was choleric, at times sullen and distant. Ruth guessed that her attention to his wants and her apparent humility were a reproach to him. Since she had a sense of humor, she chuckled over the situation.

"I'm a deceitful little scamp," she told her brother Frank, who had heard the story from Dan Brand. "I'm not half as humble as I was at first. Here I go around as if butter wouldn't melt in my mouth whenever Father is about, and really I'm beginning to think it's sort of fun."

"Hmp!" Frank snorted. "I can tell you someone who won't think it's fun if I meet him."

Chapter Eight

Coals of Fire on a Red Head

RUTH was riding circle above the rimrock. She had come out with her brothers and the other *vaqueros* to round up the yearlings for the Broderick order. There were days when she liked to put on leggings and pound through the brush after longhorns.

Her father was of opinion that this was work unfitted for a woman. He said so frequently. But Ruth could ride like a Texas brushpopper, and whenever the L C was shorthanded Lee was grumblingly glad of her help.

She had combed the ridge above and was coming down an arroyo thick with prickly pear. Her brother Bob had been with her, but he had bolted down a neighboring draw after a small bunch of hightailing stuff.

Ruth pulled up abruptly. In front of her a pebble had rolled down a steep bank to the path. From the little rock her eyes traveled up the incline down which it had come.

Above the top of a *bisnago* she saw a Stetson hat, beneath this a brown sardonic face.

"*Buenos dias, señorita,*" a cool voice drawled.

The girl stared at the owner of that voice, the man who had called himself Jeff Gray.

"What are you doing here?" she asked, and answered her own question: "You are lying in wait to kill my father!"

He slithered down the scarred slope, to face a little revolver that had somehow jumped to her hand.

"We'll talk about that," he said, a smile on his face.

"We'll talk about nothing," she cried, anger aflame in her eyes. "You light out of here, you dirty killer, or I'll call my brothers."

"Why would I want to kill Lee Chiswick when I had never seen him before?" he asked, paying no attention at all to the weapon in her hand.

"For money," she told him contemptuously. "His enemies sent for you to do the murder they were afraid to do themselves."

He shook his head. "I'm a stranger here. I don't know Howard or any of his crowd. Besides, that gang doesn't need an outsider to do its bushwhacking. They have plenty of bull rattlers

right in their midst."

"Why are you arguing about it?" she burst out stormily. "Didn't I see you shoot him? Didn't you run close to try to finish the job?"

"No," he replied quietly.

"A dozen men saw you. Smoke was coming out of your gun while you were running forward."

"So it was. I'll ask you a question. How many shots were fired before yore friends turned loose on me?"

"Two. You fired twice. What has that got to do with it?"

"A whole lot. I fired once. Question is, *who fired the first shot?*"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Use yore brains, girl," he urged. "Four men were standing within ten feet of yore father. If I had shot him would I run up and give them all a crack at me?"

"The answer is you did. Three of them were friends of Sherm Howard. Maybe you expected them to help you." A wave of fury boiled up in her. "I'm not going to discuss anything with the villain hired to murder my father. If you don't get out of here I'll—I'll—"

"What will you do?" he asked politely.

"Get out of my way," she ordered, and gave Blue Chip a touch of the spur.

The horse went up in the air. Gray caught the bridle, perhaps to quiet the animal, perhaps because he could not get out of the way.

Ruth never knew how it happened. The revolver in her hand went off. Instantly she knew the man had been hit. He dropped the rein and staggered back. Blue Chip plunged down the arroyo.

The rider of the horse dragged it to a halt and turned. She had dropped the gun during the wild dash down the draw and she dismounted to recover it. Pulling herself to the saddle again, Ruth rode back to the spot of the encounter.

He was climbing the rubble slope to the bank where she had first seen him, and he was making bad going of it. One leg dragged.

"It's your own fault for snatching at my bridle," she told him. "The gun went off."

"My leg is telling me that. Did you come back to finish what you began?"

"I carry it for rattlesnakes. I didn't mean to—"

He saw she was frightened. The bark of the revolver had for the time driven away anger.

She swung down from Blue Chip and climbed the bank. "I'll help you get up," she told him in a small voice.

"Good of you, Miss Chiswick, to help a hired killer."

He accepted her aid. After a struggle, during which the wounded leg collapsed under him once or twice, they reached the top of the bank.

Gray whistled. Out of the brush trotted a long-barreled roan.

"Where are you going? Who will look after your leg?" Ruth asked.

"I'm wondering about that," he said.

"You can't go back to Tail Holt, unless you are Sherm Howard's man."

"Tail Holt is out."

Ruth thought, swiftly. An idea jumped to her mind.

"There's a line camp in the rimrock not far from here," she explained. "Old Pat Sorley is staying there now. He is close-mouthed, and he will do as I ask. And he's a pretty good doctor too. You can hole up there for a week and not be seen by anybody except Pat. After

today our riders will be out of the rimrock. I'll take you there. We'd better hurry, so that I can get back before I'm missed."

He pulled himself to the saddle. "You're heaping coals of fire on my red head," Gray said sardonically. "Let's get going, girl."

Ruth went back to Blue Chip, mounted, and put the horse at the easiest part of the slope.

"We don't want to meet anybody," the girl said. "Better swing off to the right."

"You're the corporal of this outfit," he told her.

She led the way into the chaparral, guiding Blue Chip through the mesquite and the cholla with an admirable economy of motion. Once she stopped abruptly. Someone was riding across the mesa a hundred yards in front of them.

"One of our *vaqueros*, Tony Flores," she whispered.

They waited until they felt sure he had gone. Ruth looked at the man beside her.

"Can you make it all right?" she asked brusquely.

"I'll make it," he answered briefly.

They crossed the mesa and dropped down into a gulch which took them through the broken rimrock to a point where they looked down on a wide valley below. Ruth turned to the left, picking a way among the boulders and working up again into the rimrock along a cow trail. This dipped sharply, at a fault in the ledge, to a small park containing four or five acres.

A corral of thorny ocotillo lay at their feet. Close to it was a barn built of salmaro poles and mud. The cabin nestled against a rock wall that bounded the far side of the park.

The girl and the man wound down into the little mountain valley and crossed to the cabin. Someone stood in the doorway and watched their approach.

Pat Sorley was a little old man with a wrinkled face like a map of Ireland. At sight of Ruth he twisted it to a grin. They were the best of friends.

Ruth waved at him. He took the clay pipe from his mouth.

"It's glad I am to see you, Miss Ruth," he said.

"I've brought someone to stay with you, Pat," the girl told him. She turned to the guest, a touch of cool insolence in her voice. "You said your name is—"

"Still Jeff Gray," the man said in his soft drawl.

"Mr. Gray has been hurt," she said. "I want you to patch him up and keep him hidden here until he can travel."

"Hidden who from?" Pat asked.

"From my father and my brothers and any of our riders."

"And what for would I be doing that?" Pat asked bluntly.

"Out of Christian charity," Gray murmured ironically. "I'm supposed to have taken a crack with a six-gun at Lee Chiswick in Tail Holt the other day."

Pat bristled. "You've got a nerve telling me that." He turned to the young woman. "I'll be listenin' to anything you've got to tell me, Miss Ruth."

"He's wounded," she answered. "Let's take care of him and do the explaining afterward, Pat."

"There's sense in that." Pat did not know how much or how little of what

this fellow had said was true, but he did not intend to be the victim of his derision. "Better get that brindle thatch down and let's see what's ailing you," he said crustily.

Gray eased himself gingerly out of the saddle. "Got a pill in one leg." He hobbled into the cabin.

"Go ahead and fix him up," Ruth said. "I'll tie the horses back among the rocks." She turned away.

Ungraciously Pat set to work doctoring the wound. The bullet had passed through the thigh close to the surface and missed the artery.

"Ought to heal up nice," Sorley grunted.

He took care of the hurt with the expertness of years of experience. Cowboys were always breaking bones. Occasionally they got shot. On account of the healthy outdoor life they led the lads usually recovered swiftly. But though Pat did the job now efficiently, he did it without friendliness.

Pat had met many gentry of this stripe, hard-faced ruffians who dropped in now and again for a bed and breakfast. Like many other decent citizens he fed them, asked no questions, and with relief saw them vanish down the trail on their nefarious ways.

Chapter Nine

Ruth Sees the Light

"I DON'T know where he got this wound or anything about him, be glory," Pat said doggedly. "But what I say, Miss Ruth, is that if he's the bird shot at the old man at Tail Holt, I'll see him in Jericho before I'll let him stay here."

Ruth nodded. "I know how you feel, Pat, because that's the way I feel myself."

"What's to keep this buckaroo, soon as his leg gets a little better, from going up to the ranch some night and taking another crack at your dad?"

"That's what I'm afraid of," she admitted.

Jeff Gray sat on a homemade chair with his wounded leg resting on another. He volunteered no assurances of good behavior.

"Looky here, Miss Ruth," Pat urged. "We'd ought to tell Lee or one of the boys he is here, especially if you are sure he's the fellow you think he is."

"I know." Ruth's face wore a troubled frown. "Only—I shot him."

Pat dropped his pipe to the floor. It shattered into fifty bits. "The divil you say!"

"I don't know how it happened. Blue Chip was jumping around, and he got in the way. I didn't mean to do it."

"An innocent bystander hit through an unfortunate accident," Gray suggested.

"What was the fellow doing around here?" Pat asked accusingly.

"I was on my way to the L C," explained Gray. "Wanted to have a little talk with Chiswick."

"Wanted to shoot him, you domned villain."

"I'm one of these victims of circumstantial evidence," the crook-nosed man drawled. "Someone takes a crack at Chiswick, and I'm unanimously elected as the guy."

"We saw you do it—half a dozen of us," Ruth cried.

"Just what did you see?" the accused man asked.

"After you had shot you ran forward to finish Father, and the other men

there fired at you and drove you away. What's the use of denying it?"

"Not much use, is there?" he said evenly. "If I told my story you wouldn't believe it."

"What story could you tell? Father was wounded. We saw the smoke coming from your gun as you ran forward."

"That's correct."

"So you must have been the man."

"Must I?" He grinned at her with cheerful effrontery.

"Of course you must." Ruth almost stamped her foot in exasperation. "If you didn't do it, who did?"

"I wouldn't know—but I could guess."

"Who then?" she demanded.

"If I ever mention it, probably it will be to the gent himself," he said softly.

"I thought so."

Gray turned to the line rider. "Two shots were fired before Mr. Chiswick's friends took a hand. I fired the second. Point is, who cut loose with the first?"

"If you weren't in it, why did you shoot at all?" Ruth asked.

"I've asked myself that two-three times since," he replied suavely. "Plumb dumb of me. For twenty years I've been minding my own business exclusive, yet soon as I hit Tail Holt I butt into yours, not only once but se-vereal times."

"You beat around the bush without telling anything," the girl charged.

"By your own story you shot at the boss onct," Sorley snapped.

"Who said that was my story? I don't recollect ever telling it."

Ruth stared at the hardy scamp, her eyes dilating with excitement. "You mean you didn't fire at Father at all but at the villain who was trying to kill him."

"Go to the head of the class, Miss," Gray said with a grim, ironic smile. "It's the best story I could think up after three or four days, so I thought I would come back and try it on Lee Chiswick. Course you're smart as a whip and I wouldn't expect to put it across with you."

A queer lift of joy sang in the girl's blood. She knew this was the truth. It explained everything. He had fired on the assassin and run forward to protect her father from any others who might turn their guns on him while he was defenseless. Naturally his purpose had been mistaken. The fire of Dan and Curly had driven him away. He had no time to explain. If he stayed, he would be shot down. There was no chance to show his weapon, with only one chamber empty.

"Why didn't you tell me before?" she cried.

"You and yore friends are so handy with guns I never get time to make oration," he said dryly.

Distress flooded her. She had shot him, after he had perhaps saved the life of her father.

"His story don't look good to me," Sorley said coldly. "I would say he was runnin' a whizzer on us, Miss Ruth."

"No. It's true." The girl drew a deep breath of relief. "I'm glad it is."

The wounded man looked at her. "What difference does it make to you whether I or someone else shot him?" he asked.

Her eyes met his, the color on her cheeks hot beneath them. "I don't like you a bit. I think you are hateful. But I didn't believe you were a low scoundrel until—what I saw at Tail Holt. Now I know you're not that kind of man. You saved my father's life. I don't know how to thank you—or to tell you how sorry I am that I hurt you."

"So now it's all right," he jeered, "and I ought to tell you how grateful I am for the lead pill you gave me."

Ruth felt anger stir in her, but she kept it down. "If there's anything I can do for you while you're here—anything I can bring you," she said in a carefully even voice.

"I'm going to see you again, am I? How nice! There are several things you can bring me. One is some Bull Durham. I'd like two-three books, and the latest newspaper you have. Also, bring Lee Chiswick. I want a powwow with him."

"What kind of books?" she asked. "I can bring you any one of Scott's you want. We have a set."

"Fine. The only ones I've read are *Ivanhoe* and *Kenilworth*. Any of the others will do. You'll have me plumb educated, Miss Chiswick. I owe you a vote of thanks for busting my leg."

"I'll send the books with my father," she said.

"And the Bull Durham—you wouldn't forget that."

Ruth walked out of the room, her head in the air. Pat Sorley walked with her to get Blue Chip.

"You reckon you got this fellow pegged right, Miss Ruth?" he asked. "That story he tells sounds phony to me. He had to make up some excuse."

She brushed this aside impatiently, the angry color still hot in her cheeks. "It's true enough, Pat. He's all right—outside of being so mean that if a skunk bit him it would probably die of poison."

"He wasn't exactly polite," Pat admitted, "but maybe there was some excuse for that."

"He's the most insolent person I ever met," she exploded.

"Likely he's not used to doing good deeds. When he did this one for Lee and it turned round and hit him over the head with a shillalah it annoyed him considerable."

Chapter Ten

A Note on the Table

LEE CHISWICK broke into his daughter's story excitedly. "He's hanging around waiting for a chance to dry-gulch me! I'll have him rounded up and rubbed out before he's twenty-four hours older."

"You won't need to round him up. I can tell you where he is."

"Where is he?" demanded Chiswick.

"He's at the rimrock line camp, with a bullet hole in his leg."

"Did Pat get him?"

"No. I did."

"You what?"

"I shot him."

Her father stared at her with blank astonishment. "Good God, girl! What do you mean?"

"I tried to pass him. He caught at the bridle rein. I don't know why. Somehow my gun went off and hit him. I didn't want him to die before he could get help, so I took him to the camp."

"Why didn't you come and get some of us?"

"I was as safe with him as I would be with you, Father," she said. "He isn't that kind of man. I don't like him. He's—insulting. But he is not the kind of ruffian who would hurt a woman or would take advantage of a man in a fight. He didn't shoot you. Someone else did."

"That's crazy talk," Lee shouted.

"We saw him do it."

"We thought we saw him do it," she corrected. "But we didn't. He saw someone fire at you and shot at the man. Then he ran forward to protect you, and we all thought he was the killer. Think it over, Father. From the position you were standing the bullet that creased you must have been fired in the alley, but this Gray came from another direction."

"Got it all figured out, haven't you—with his help?" Lee said angrily.

"If he had been the man, would he have run forward into a nest of us? It isn't reasonable. He was taken by surprise when Dan began shooting at him. I could see that. To save his life he had to get out."

"What's he doing here then?"

"He wants to see you. I don't know what about. He insisted on my bringing you."

"He'll see me all right," the cattleman said.

"My opinion is that he saved your life, after he had already taken care of me when a crazy man was on the shoot. Then I put a bullet in him, and now you want to finish him." Ruth spoke with sharp bitterness.

"I'll listen to him," Lee told her. "I'll hear what he has got to say. Maybe you are right, but I don't believe it. If he comes clean and tells me what he is doing here—and if what he says satisfies me—he'll be as safe with me as in God's pocket. I'll have him brought to the house and we'll take care of him here. But he can't pull the wool over my eyes. He has got to be straight goods."

"That's fair," Ruth agreed. "I don't know anything about who he is. But he wouldn't shoot a man in the back. I'd stake everything I had on that."

Chiswick nodded. "I would have said that myself, and I'm not often wrong about a man. He'll get a chance to tell his story."

"May I ride up to the line camp with you?"

"No," he exploded, and slammed a fist down on the breakfast table to emphasize his decision. "You can't go with me! What's the matter with you, girl? You head for trouble like a thirsty steer for water. No wonder folks think you're a wild young hellion. You got to learn to act genteel."

"Would it be unladylike for me to go down with you and take some fried chicken and biscuits to a sick man?" she wanted to know.

"You fix up this fried chicken and I'll take it down," Lee said firmly. "I aim to be reasonable, but I'm through letting you behave so crazy."

Ruth gave up. She packed the tobacco, the books, and the food. For Pat she put in a corncob pipe to replace the broken clay one.

In a natural meadow half a mile from the house Lee stopped to give Dan Brand instructions about the drive of yearlings sold to Broderick. This done, he told his son Frank and the foreman what he had just learned from Ruth.

Frank offered to ride with him to the rimrock camp. "This bird may be what we thought he was, a hired killer," he suggested.

"Maybe so," Lee agreed carelessly. "But when I get so I can't look after myself against one wounded man I'll go into an old men's home."

"How do you know there's only one?" Dan said, backing up the young man. "He may have friends there. This may be a trap. No use being foolhardy. I can ride up to the rimrock with you and cut across later to meet the drive

at Dead Horse Crossing."

There was something to that idea, Chiswick conceded.

"Only I'll go with you, not Dan," insisted Frank. "If our enemies are after you I have something to say about it, haven't I?"

"Everybody seems to have more to say than I," the father grunted.

"We might as well start," Frank grinned.

"All right," Lee yielded. "Come along if you'd feel better about it. You can join the trail herd later like you say."

The Chiswicks rode up to the rimrock and skirted the edge of it until they reached a break. Through this they climbed to the lip of the park where the line camp lay. From the chimney of the cabin a thin trickle of smoke drifted.

"Pat is probably line-riding and has left this fellow alone," Frank said.

As they drew closer Lee hulloed the house. From the boulder field back of it an echo came back to them. No other answer sounded. A second time he shouted, still without response.

"Get your gun out, boy," he ordered grimly. "I don't like this."

He swung from the saddle and drew the rifle attached to it. Frank dismounted hurriedly, his horse between him and the house.

The two men worked toward the cabin, using their horses to screen them as much as possible from any sharpshooters who might be in the building or among the rocks above. Nobody stirred except themselves.

Lee maneuvered close to the door, then made a bolt for it. His son was inside scarce a second later. The cabin was empty.

"Where's the fellow gone?" Lee asked.

"I reckon he wasn't as bad hurt as he was making out," Frank said.

"What's this?"

Lee picked a piece of wrapping paper from the table. He read aloud something that had been scrawled on it with a pencil. "*Much obliged, Doc, for fixing my leg. See you later maybe.*"

Frank looked over his shoulder. "He lit out after Pat left this morning," he said.

"Looks like."

"Maybe he was scared you wouldn't believe his story and figured he had better take to the brush."

"Might be that. Anyway, if he had been an honest man he would have stayed. He came to kill me. I'd like to know who sent him."

"I reckon you've got a lot of enemies from the old days," Frank said.

"Old days and new days both," Lee agreed ruefully.

Someone outside gave a shout. Frank looked out of the window. Pat Sorley was riding toward the cabin.

Lee walked to the door. "Where's that fellow Gray gone, Pat?" he asked.

"Search me," the line rider answered. "He left in the middle of the night. I found that note on the table when I wakened. So I rode to the ranch house to let you know. Thought maybe he would be down there lying in the brush to get you. Miss Ruth told me you had started here, so I came straight back."

"How about his leg?" Lee asked. "Was it all a bluff?"

"No. Miss Ruth shot him up. Just a flesh wound. He could travel with it some."

"I reckon we'll have to start a man hunt," the cattleman said harshly. "No telling who he'll start sniping at next."

Chapter Eleven

Two Thousand Dollars Reward

JEFF GRAY rode into Tail Holt two days after leaving the rimrock line camp. His broad shoulders sagged with weariness. The eyes of the man were sunken. The lean face was haggard and unshaven. At the Alamo Corral he dismounted stiffly.

The owner of the place, Jim Reynolds, squinted an unspoken question at him from under slanted eyebrows. Gray unsaddled the sweat-streaked roan gelding with a competent economy of motion.

"Yore bronc some gaunted," Reynolds said.

"Some," Gray agreed.

He watered and fed the animal himself. Reynolds wondered who this stranger was.

"I'll put up at Ma Presnall's if she has room for me," Gray said. "Could you send word to Sherm Howard that I'm there and want to see him?"

"What name shall I say?" asked Reynolds.

"Jeff Gray. I'm obliged, sir."

Gray limped up the street toward the boarding-house. As he passed Hank Ransom's blacksmith's shop Curly Connor walked out of it.

Curly gave a yelp of surprise. "What you doing here, fellow?" he demanded, and his hand slid toward the butt of a revolver.

"Don't start anything. I'm here to explain."

"Explain nothing. You're one of these dirty killers from ambush."

"No," Gray corrected quietly. "You've got me wrong. I've just come from the L C Ranch."

"If you've killed Lee Chiswick—"

"I haven't. Take yore time, Curly. Don't push on the reins."

The body of Connor was weaving slightly. At any moment he might move to violent action. The cold gaze of Gray never lifted from the eyes of his challenger.

Curly did not draw. Something in that hard look held him. He would strike presently, he told himself.

"I didn't hurt Chiswick," Gray went on evenly. "I never have."

"Liar!" Connor flung out. The word unloosed a stream of biting epithets. Curly poured them out, working himself to the explosive point. Without heat he could not kill a man who would not reach for a gun.

Gray guessed the moment, to a precise split second. As Curly whipped out the .44 a lightning right leaped at him. The cowboy took the knotted fist on the point of the chin. Curly hit the ground at full length. An arm lifted feebly and dropped. The figure on the ground lay relaxed and still.

There had been nobody present a few moments before. Now there were half a dozen men. Gray looked round at them.

"He would have it," the red-haired man said.

Mile High nodded. "Y'betcha! Quickest work I ever saw."

"I'm going to Ma Presnall's," Gray said. "Anyone who wants me can find me there." He turned away and went limping up the street.

Ma Presnall had her muscular arms bare to the elbows. There was a splash of flour on one temple.

He could have a room and board, she said, for a dollar a day or five dollars a week. Strangers paid in advance. A

five-dollar bill passed from Gray to her and she led him to his room.

After washing the caked dust from face and hands he lay down on the bed. The wound in his leg was throbbing. For the better part of sixty hours he had been in the saddle and he was almost worn out.

In a room below that served as a lobby he had picked up a copy of the *Tough Nut Cracker*. One of the news items interested him.

A dastardly assassin who gave his name as Jeff Gray attempted the life of Lee Chiswick at Tail Holt on Thursday. As Chiswick, his daughter, and foreman were about to leave town two shots were fired at him from the alley adjoining the Golden Nugget saloon. He was wounded slightly in the neck, but fortunately the killer was run off before he could complete the murderous deed.

The man Gray is not known in this part of the country, but it is thought that he came from West Texas. Chiswick is one of the leading cattlemen in the Sweet Spring Valley, where he settled and stocked the L C Ranch about five years ago. Prior to that time he had been for years a captain in the famous Texas Rangers. The general opinion is that Gray is a relative of some of the criminals Captain Chiswick was forced to exterminate during his official career.

Another news story on the same page caught his eye.

Our Tail Holt correspondent sends word that a would-be bad man who styled himself Wild Jim Pender was killed Thursday in the Golden Nugget saloon. It appears that Pender had filled himself with tanglefoot and rode into the Golden Nugget with the intention of holding up the place. After firing one shot he fell pierced with bullets. There are no regrets in Tail Holt, since he was regarded as a dangerous nuisance.

Gray wondered whether his own obituary would shortly appear in the *Cracker*. If so, there would be no regrets in Tail Holt, since he too was probably considered a dangerous nuisance.

With his pocket knife he ripped open the lining of his vest and drew out a folded paper. He expected to need it shortly. The paper was a printed poster offering a reward of two thousand dollars for the capture of Clint Doke, the leader of a band of outlaws who had held up and robbed the Texas & Southern Flyer. A description of the desperado was given. With it was a picture taken from a cut. The face that looked back from the poster at Jeff Gray was his own.

Through the door Ma Presnall called information. "Some gents to see you."

"Who are they?" Gray asked, putting the paper in his vest pocket.

"Sherm Howard, Curly Connor, and Morg Norris."

There was a barely perceptible pause before Gray said, "Ask them to come up, Mrs. Presnall, if you will."

He pulled on his boots and swiftly examined his revolver. This invasion in force might or might not mean trouble. Curly had probably come with a chip on his shoulder. Norris was a killer of the worst kind. On the other hand Sherman Howard had the reputation of doing his fighting by proxy. He might have brought Morg merely as a defensive precaution.

In his throat there beat the pulse of excitement that always accompanied impending deadly danger. His fingers

trembled.

A knock on the door sounded. Gray's nervousness vanished instantly. He said, "Come in," his drawling voice cool as ice water.

Chapter Twelve

Jeff Gray Talks Fast

THEIR host maneuvered Norris to a rocking chair, Howard to a straight-backed chair. Curly he seated at the foot of the bed. Gray stood in a shadowy corner farthest from the window. He was giving himself the best chance possible.

"A little crowded in here, gents," Gray said lightly. "Hope you don't mind sitting on the bed, Mr. Connor."

"Suits me," Curly answered.

"Sorry about that little mix-up. Fact is, I had to act sudden to prevent one of us from being killed." The smile of the crook-nosed man was genial and friendly.

Curly said, "'S all right. I had my chin out. We start from the chunk again. You claim you can explain. Hop to it."

Gray nodded, turning his attention to the big man. "I hated to trouble you to come here, Mr. Howard," he said apologetically, "but I have a busted leg that interferes with walking."

"I didn't mind coming. I wasn't busy." Howard's leaden opaque eyes never lifted from the stranger.

"Just reached town and I thought I'd better see you," Gray mentioned.

Howard said nothing. He waited for the situation to develop. The man had a capacity for effective silence.

"Figuring I might want to stay around Tail Holt a while," Gray went on easily.

"It's a free country." Howard's voice was suave.

"For some folks," Norris added.

Gray smiled. "My idea too, Mr. Norris. I want to find out if I'm one of those folks."

"Last time I saw you that roan was foggin' it outa town fast," Norris taunted. "You looked like you had hurry-up business anywhere but here."

"I changed my mind," Gray said.

"Why?" Howard asked bluntly.

"Got a busted leg. Shot up the other day."

"In front of the Golden Nugget?" Norris inquired.

"No. Out on the L C Range."

"While you were gunning for Lee," Curly charged.

"No."

"That so?" Norris snarled. "Who did it? How come you out there?"

"Talk fast, fellow," Curly ordered harshly.

"Miss Ruth Chiswick did it." Gray did not look at Curly. His stony gaze was on the killer Norris. "I was there on personal business of my own."

Curly ripped out an angry oath. "If you hurt Miss Ruth—"

Smoothly Howard interrupted. "Let us hear the story, Curly. Mr. Gray sent for us to tell it, don't you reckon?"

Gray told the story of his adventures in the L C territory, with careful editorial elisions. They heard it to a finish.

"That Chiswick girl is a tough proposition," Howard said, shaking his head gravely. "She'll come to a bad end, like enough."

"Nothing of the kind," retorted Curly hotly. "Miss Chiswick's a mighty nice little lady."

"Some hot-tempered, but with the

making of a fine woman in her," Gray concurred.

"She's sure a wampas cat," Norris cut in, his slurred voice a sneer.

"Leave the girl out of this," Curly snapped.

"Mr. Norris only meant she is a little lively," Gray explained.

Howard interposed. "If the girl is a little—wild—or free—we got to remember she will probably straighten out fine, like Mr. Gray says. She has been brought up without a mother and we must be charitable to her."

A yellow light flickered in the eyes of Norris, a barometer of rising annoyance. "Suits me," he growled. "Let's get down to cases. I don't trust this fellow a lick of the road, Sherm. Who is he? Where does he come from? What was he doing out Sweet Springs Valley way when he was shot—if he was?"

"Who hired him to rub out Lee Chiswick?" Curly demanded. "Let the fellow come clean."

"These are the questions Mr. Gray is about to answer, boys," Howard said with his oily smile.

"If he knows what's good for him," Norris barked.

Gray spoke, very gently. "You wouldn't crowd me, Mr. Norris, would you?"

"We're not crowding you," Howard said evenly. "I'm a peaceable citizen, not looking for trouble. You sent for me, and I came. As you know, Mr. Gray, we have been maligned by our enemies. They would go a long way to injure us. Is it asking too much of you to give us information showing you are not one of them? We are law-abiding folks, but—"

Norris laughed. He did not go in for cant. "We'll take that for granted, Sherm. We're asking this bird some questions. I want them answered *muy pronto*."

Ignoring Norris, the crook-nosed man spoke to Howard. "I don't claim to be so law-abiding myself. Thought it wasn't good manners to ask a stranger about his past."

"You can't catch a mule without an ear of corn, Mr. Gray," the big man said. "If I get you right, you are asking our help. Before we give it we have a right to know all about you."

"Fine, for you," the cornered man replied. "But how about me? How do I know some fox won't write a letter and have me dragged back to—to some place I don't want to go?"

Howard looked affronted. "If a man throws in with us, we don't betray him."

"Is that a promise?" Gray asked.

"Y'betcha, if we're satisfied with yore story," Curly said.

"If," Norris accented, with an ugly laugh.

Reluctantly Gray drew from his pocket the poster. Still slumped in his chair, the big-shouldered fat man read it carefully.

"So you're Clint Doke," he said.

"Lemme have a look at it," Curly said impatiently.

He read aloud, "*Height five foot ten, age 29, weight about 158 pounds, crook nose, light red hair, gray eyes, scar on back of left hand. Will probably fight desperately before being taken.*" Curly lifted his eyes and grinned at Gray. "Certainly reads like it might be you, unless you've got a twin brother the spittin' image of you, even to the scar on yore hand."

Norris reached for the poster. "The picture looks a heap like this guy, I'll say that. I knew all the time he was from Texas."

"Says you and these three other fellows are wanted for robbing the Texas and Southern flyer," Curly mentioned. "Where are the other guys?"

"On the dodge, down in the Texas brush country."

"How come you not to stay there?" Curly inquired.

"The rangers were after me special," Gray explained. "I figured I had better light out."

Norris looked at the poster, his lip curled. "Worth two thousand on the hoof—or as meat, I reckon—down Santone way," he said. "The other guys who helped rob the train only rate at five hundred apiece. But Mr. Doke—he's an honest to God Jesse James."

Gray ignored the jeer. "Like to correct you on one point, Mr. Norris. Two thousand on the hoof. Not a cent if shipped down in a coffin."

"That's right," Norris assented. "I didn't read it careful. Well, Mr. Doke—Gray, I mean—it's a pleasure to meet up with a famous man like you."

"This is private information," the fugitive said. "I don't expect the word passed around among yore friends."

"It still isn't clear to me what you were doing in the Sweet Spring Valley," Curly insisted. "Or why you wanted to kill Lee Chiswick."

Gray smiled. "I was in the Sweet Spring Valley because I had to get out of Tail Holt in a hurry on account of Curly Connor making a target out of me," he told the black-haired man cheerfully. "I happened to land in the L C country. About yore other question—I never have wanted to kill Chiswick."

"You just shot at him for practice," Curly suggested.

"I didn't shoot at him." Gray let his cold eyes rest on Norris. "I reckon that's not information to yore friends."

"Meaning me?" asked Norris, his eyes slitted.

"Meaning only that this has been talked over among you. Someone took a crack at Chiswick. Whoever it was, I could just see his figure in the alley, and I ripped loose at him."

"Why?" asked Howard. "Had you any chips in the game?"

"I've asked myself why often enough since," Gray replied, shaking his head. "Damfino why. Nary chip, Mr. Howard. But I had just been eating supper with him as his guest, and I reckon my notion must have been to see he got a fair break."

"Is it straight goods what he says, Sherm?" Curly demanded.

"I reckon so, Curly. One of the boys got impatient and cut loose at Chiswick."

"Who?"

"I don't know who. I'm telling you only what I've heard."

"All right," Norris said. "This busted leg of his. Do we have to take it on faith?"

"It needs some attention," the wounded man replied. "Is there a doc in town?"

"No doc, but Sherm here is almost as good."

"Fine. Would you mind looking at it, Mr. Howard?" Gray asked.

Howard examined, washed, and dressed the wound. There could be no doubt it was authentic. After he had finished taking care of it the fat man gave a decision.

"No objection to your staying here, Mr. Gray. This community doesn't aim to be hard on a man in trouble. Of course, if Lee Chiswick finds out you are here, as he is liable to do, it will be up to you to look out for yourself."

Chapter Thirteen

Lee Chiswick Follows a Cold Trail

THE *vaquero* Tony Flores rode in to the big house with word that there had been another raid on L C stock.

"How do you know?" Lee Chiswick demanded in an angry voice.

"Ran across the tracks of a bunch being driven up the box canyon," the Mexican said.

"New tracks?"

"I'd say not more than a day old, *señor*."

"Too late to catch the thieves or pick up the stolen stock," Brand mourned.

"Maybe not." Lee gave curt orders. "Arm yourselves, boys. We'll take off after them. Ruth, help Frank rustle grub for us—enough for two-three days. Bob, get Pat Sorley and Buck Conrad. Cut across and meet us at the mouth of the box canyon. Be there inside of an hour."

Ruth gathered all the food she had cooked, had Nelly, the maid, grind two packages of Arbuckle's, chose a side of bacon, added flour and corn meal, as well as salt, pepper, and sugar. The food she put in gunny sacks.

Her brother roped a pack horse and put on a crossbuck. He threw a diamond hitch expertly over the supplies.

"Bring your slickers," the boss snapped. "No war sacks. We're traveling light. You won't be sitting on your spurs any this trip. Got to hot-foot it over a cold trail."

His daughter watched the posse go. She wished she could ride with them, but she knew better than to suggest this to her father.

At the entrance to the box canyon Lee found Sorley, Conrad, and his son Bob waiting for them. Sorley was sniffing over the ground like a dog looking for a scent. The old man was an expert trailer.

The cattleman turned his horse over to Frank and strode forward to join Pat.

"What d'you find?" he asked.

"About half a dozen of 'em with a bunch of young stuff traveling lickity-split," Sorley said. "They're in one hell of a hurry. Here's a big long-stepping horse with outsize shoes. This one has a broken hoof. You'll be pleased to know, Lee, that the lying scut who calls himself Jeff Gray is with them. Must have ridden right over here from the line camp."

"Sure?"

"Unless he has loaned his roan to someone else. I made it my business to take particular notice of that animal while he was at the line camp. The blacksmith who shod that roan was either short of time or nails. There's a nail shy in the shoe on the left front hoof. Take a look at this track."

Lee Chiswick studied the foot mark.

"Hmp! We've got him at last so he can't lie out of it. He's one of the Tail Holt rustling gang."

"I knew he was a bad hombre first minute I clapped eyes on him," Brand said.

Lee drew Frank to one side. "Son, we're following a cold trail. Look at those clouds. It's going to rain tonight and all tracks will be blotted out. Might as well hunt a needle in a haystack as these scoundrels. I want you to go to Tail Holt and keep your eyes open. What I'd like to know is who is in town and who isn't. Find out who has been away. Notice who drops in. If two

or three come together check up on that."

"I'll find out what I can," Frank said.

"Be careful about asking questions, and don't get into trouble with these thieves. If anyone wants to know what you are doing there say you have come to meet a buyer we are expecting from New Mexico."

Frank cut back to the ranch while the others rode up the box canyon. It was already beginning to drizzle when the posse pushed into the high lands above the gorge. Before night fell it was raining steadily. Chiswick made camp on Stampede Creek, well up toward the headwaters.

All through the night rain poured down. The campers rose in the morning wet and stiff. They warmed themselves at the fire, dried off as best they could, and saddled as a chill sun broke through the mist.

Chiswick divided his men. One half of them he sent with Dan Brand to comb the Flattops. His son Bob and Sorley stayed with him. They dropped in on half a dozen mountain ranches on the far chance they might hear or see something of the missing stock. The owners of two or three of these were away from home. The others showed no pleasure at sight of the L C men.

Lee questioned them sharply. The answers were either evasive or sulky. They had no information to give him. For all he knew his cattle might be hidden in some gulch or hollow less than a mile distant.

Late in the day he joined Brand and his men at an appointed spot. The foreman had made a wide sweep of country without seeing any L C stuff. Wearily the riders returned to the ranch, getting in late at night.

Ruth knew from her father's dejection that they had been unsuccessful. She waited until after he had eaten to ask questions. While he smoked his pipe he told her of the expedition.

"This fellow Gray was in it," he said abruptly, when he had apparently finished.

She was clearing away the dishes and turned, slim figure alertly poised, to find out how he knew.

"Pat had checked up on his horse and knew the hoofprints," Chiswick explained. "They must have sent him here ahead of them to locate a good bunch to run off."

"And I believed his lies," Ruth said bitterly.

Lee rose and knocked the ashes out of his pipe. "Going to turn in and get some sleep," he said.

Ruth helped Nelly wash up the dishes. She went to her room, but not at once to bed. She was unhappy at this proof of Jeff Gray's perfidy.

For the twentieth time she read the note he had left for Pat: *Much obliged Doc, for fixing my leg. See you later maybe.*

It was an impudent message, she decided, written by a scoundrel who was jeering at the man who had helped him.

A hot shame flooded her. He had been very much in her mind. Even though

she had not liked him her thoughts had been full of him. Never before had she met any men quite like him. Back of his saturnine recklessness there was a cool, quiet strength that impressed her. She had made sure there was no wickedness in the brown face from which the fearless level eyes looked straight at one. Whatever he had done, he had seemed to her a man among ten thousand.

Of course she had made a fool of herself again—she must be one of those women who go crackbrained over men!

Chapter Fourteen

A Short, Ugly Word

FRANK CHISWICK took a room at Ma Presnall's, the only place at Tail Holt which offered accommodations. He could see that he was eyed with surprise by one or two men who knew him, but he took no overt notice of that. To Curly he mentioned casually that he was waiting for an expected cattle buyer whom he was going to take back with him to the ranch.

His time he spent loafing at the corrals, on the street, or in one of the saloons which served as social meeting-places. He kept his eyes and ears open, though he asked few questions. When the stagecoach came in he was on the spot to greet the man for whom he was supposed to be waiting, and he exhibited the proper annoyance at not finding him among the passengers.

At the end of the second day he went back to his boarding-house completely bored. He washed up and went down for supper.

At the long table in the dining-room Ma Presnall put him next a crook-nosed stranger with reddish hair. Presently the man mentioned amiably that his name was Gray.

The words were a little shock to Frank. His swift gaze swept the man, down and up. He noted a certain pantherish lightness of body, a hard recklessness of face. A chill ran through young Chiswick.

Stiffly he answered, iron in his voice, "I am Frank Chiswick."

Two or three of those at the table were watching them.

"I reckon you don't feel friendly, Mr. Chiswick," drawled Gray.

"Would you expect me to feel friendly with a man who tried to murder my father and later helped to rustle his cattle?" Frank asked harshly.

"You've certainly got me wrong, sir," Gray replied, with unhurried courtesy. "But I don't expect I can convince you of it."

"Not in a hundred years," Frank retorted hotly.

"Short and sweet," Gray said with a smile, his manner cheerfully indifferent. He turned and began to talk with the man on the other side of him.

As soon as supper was over Frank went to the landlady and asked her to change his seat to the other end of the table.

The day after Frank reached Tail Holt he saw Morgan Norris and Mile High jog into town and tie at the hitch bar in front of the Golden Nugget. Young Chiswick sauntered up the street and turned in at Curt Dubbs's place.

Norris and Mile High were at the bar slacking thirst after a short visit to a hidden cache. Frank ordered a beer and glanced over the room while he waited for it. A poker game was in progress,

but the wheel and the faro table were both deserted. Around the poker table sat six men. Curly and Jeff Gray were two of them.

To Mile High his companion said, out of the corner of his mouth, "Tail Holt sure is being honored these days."

Mile High glanced at Chiswick hastily, to see if he had caught the slur. "What's eatin' you, Morg?" he said hastily. "No use raisin' a rookus."

Frank finished the beer and moved away. He heard Norris say, without troubling to lower his voice, "I was aimin' to ask him how his old man is getting along putting down the rustlers."

The tall cowpuncher laughed, then tried to cover his mirth with a cough.

Chiswick flushed angrily. The rage was still simmering in him when he passed the poker table and met the bland smile of Gray.

Out of the back door Frank passed into a night roofed by a star-peppered sky. He cut across a vacant lot and walked up the narrow dusty road leading to a crooked canyon the black mouth of which opened in front of him. At intervals, on either side, were the small adobe houses in which the people of Tail Holt lived.

In the shadow of a cottonwood he saw the figures of a man and a woman locked in embrace. The murmur of the man's low voice reached him as he passed. At the end of the road, where it terminated in a narrow trail running up the canyon, Frank turned and retraced his steps.

The girl beneath the cottonwood ran into the adjoining house and the man came out to the road. He was just behind Chiswick, whistling gaily. His brisk stride presently brought him abreast of Frank.

"'Lo, fellow. How are cases?" he asked cheerfully.

His good spirits subsided abruptly. Lou Howard did not feel like a conquering hero when he recognized the man beside him.

"So you're at it again," Frank said grimly.

There was a false note of heartiness in the glib reply of Howard.

"I been wanting to have a talk with you, Frank," he said. "I reckon you have done heard Ruth's side of the story. You know her better than I do. How bossy she is when she gets a notion in her head, and has to have her own way. I tried to talk her out of this elopement business, and finally I did all right. Told her to go home and behave like a good girl, which of course she is, come down to brass tacks."

"You liar," Frank said.

Howard bristled. "Looky here. You can't talk thataway to me. I won't stand it for a minute."

"I *am* talking that way. I'm telling you that you're a liar and a yellow cur. Right now I'm going to whale the life out of you."

Frank weighed twenty pounds less than the other man. In actual physical strength he was no match for the Tail Holt loafer, but he yearned to get at this scamp who had, according to his view, insulted Ruth and dragged her name into common talk.

"Don't you monkey with me, fellow," blustered Lou. "My friends will make you mighty sorry if you try to do me a meanness."

"Put up yore dukes," Frank ordered.

The larger man backed away protesting that he did not want to fight.

"But you're going to all the same," insisted Chiswick, and he slapped the cheek of the other.

Howard reached for a gun. The fingers of Frank's left hand closed on his wrist and twisted the arm. With a yelp of pain Howard dropped the revolver to the ground. He broke free and tried to run. Within a dozen strides Frank landed on his back and brought him down.

As he scrambled to his feet Chiswick crowded him against an adobe wall and lashed out at his frightened face. Feebly Howard put up his arms to defend himself. For five minutes he took a hard drubbing, then collapsed to the ground.

"For God's sake, don't!" he whined. "I've had enough. You're killing me."

"I've heard about yore talk," Frank panted, still hot with anger. "Listen. If you ever mention my sister's name again I'll beat you till you can't stand." He turned on his heel and walked down the road.

Frank had no feeling of elation at what he had done, but the fellow would keep his mouth shut after this.

It would be better to go back to the rooming-house, Chiswick decided. To hang around Main Street now would be asking for trouble. Someone very likely would take on the quarrel for Lou. If so, it would be with guns. By morning a more reasonable point of view would obtain.

He turned into Main Street down the alley beside the Golden Nugget. As he did so, he caught sight of a man at the hitch rack in front of the gambling-house. The man was Jeff Gray. Frank stopped in the shadow and watched him.

Gray was examining the hoof of a horse. He put down the foot of the animal, glanced swiftly at the door of the Golden Nugget, and moved to a second horse tied to the rack. He stooped and picked up the left hind leg of the cow pony. Long and carefully he studied the hoof, not forgetting to look occasionally in the direction of the door. He straightened, dusted his hands, and walked into the Golden Nugget.

On his way to the lodging-house Frank asked himself questions. The horses at the hitch rack had been the ones upon which Morg Norris and Mile High had ridden into town a little while ago. What was Gray trying to find out? Why was he interested in these horses more than any others?

Frank went to his room and forgot the incident. Very likely it had no importance.

Five minutes later Lou Howard pushed open the door of the Golden Nugget and moved, feet dragging, to the bar.

"Gimme a drink—a stiff one," he ordered.

The bartender stared at his bruised and bleeding face. "Holy mackerel! You been tangling with a grizzly, Lou?"

"He jumped me—when I wasn't looking," Howard said, almost weeping with self-pity.

"Who jumped you?" Morgan Norris asked.

"Frank Chiswick. That's who."

"A kid," Norris jeered.

"No such thing. An' he lit on my back while I was walking down the road, then beat me up something awful."

"You sure look like a tiger had clawed you," Curly said cheerfully. "Frank certainly worked you over considerable."

He was immensely pleased. Curly had just heard the man had been dropping hints about his conquest of Ruth Chiswick.

"I hadn't a chance, me being down and half senseless," Lou complained,

dabbing at his face with a handkerchief. "He kicked me with his heavy boots in the face and ribs."

"It's time some one cut the comb of those damned Chiswicks," Norris growled. "I'll go along with you any time you say to fix this fellow's clock, Lou."

"How much help do you reckon Lou will need, Morg?" Curly inquired.

"You throwin' in with the Chiswicks, Curly?" murmured Norris, derision in his voice.

"Would I have to ask yore permission, Morg?" the black-haired man demanded coolly. "Or am I free, white, and twenty-one?"

The eyes of Morgan Norris flickered over Curly. The killer leaned negligently against the bar, his body slumped, his eyes sleepy.

"I like to know who my friends are, Curly," he said softly.

"Don't get you, Morg. When a kid whops a loose-mouthed scalawag bigger and older than he is, do we all have to get on the prod about it?"

"He didn't whop me," blustered Howard. "Didn't you hear me say he jumped me when I wasn't looking?"

"I heard you," Curly said with a skeptical grin.

"I never saw the day I couldn't comb that bird's feathers for him," the damaged man bragged. He finished his drink and went away to repair his wounds.

Jeff Gray, watching him, caught the look that passed between young Howard and Morgan Norris. Presently the latter left the bar and sauntered back to the washroom after Lou.

Gray also drifted in that direction. He sat down at a table close to the wash-room wall and began to deal out a hand of solitaire. Intently he listened to catch anything that might be said behind the thin wall.

Chapter Fifteen

From Ambush

FRANK called "Come in" and Jeff Gray walked into the bedroom.

"What are you doing here?" Frank demanded, jumping to his feet.

"Like to have a few words with you, Chiswick," Gray said.

"I won't talk with you about anything," Frank cried.

"Something important."

"I won't have you here," Chiswick barked at him. "Unless you want trouble, get out."

"I'm going to get out in just a minute. All I want is to tell you something I've heard."

Walking to the table where his gun lay, Frank shouted at him, "Get out, you double-crossing polecat."

Swiftly Gray whipped out his gun. "Don't make a mistake, Chiswick," he advised quietly.

"So that's it! You've come to kill me. Does yore contract call for me too as well as father?"

"You damn fool!" Gray broke out in exasperation. "I never saw so crazy a family. I've come to tell you something, and you're going to listen to me whether you want to or not. Morg Norris and Lou Howard are fixing to rub you out."

"If it were so, would you be here telling me?"

"I *am* here. Boy, forget what you've got against me. I overheard some talk. They will try to draw you into a fuss. At the right time you'll get it. Do you

understand?"

"I understand you ate supper with my father and tried to gun him from behind afterward," Frank told him wildly. "And that you loaded my sister with lies so she took you to one of our line camps to be doctored up. We've got yore number, fellow. You were with the thieves who drove our stuff up the box canyon."

"How do you know I went up that canyon with the rustlers?"

"We're not plumb idiots. Pat Sorley recognized the tracks of yore horse soon as he saw them again."

"I ought to be more careful," Gray said dryly. "But I was in some hurry."

"Night riders are when they figure honest men may be after them," Frank cut at him contemptuously.

Gray swept this aside with a gesture of the revolver. "All right. Leave it lay at that. I'm a hired killer and a thief. Say I'm paying off a grudge I owe Lou Howard and Morg Norris. That would make me a double double-crosser. Put it any way you like. But get this through yore noodle. If you stick around here another day you'll go home in a wagon covered by a sheet."

"I wouldn't believe anything in the world you told me," Frank answered.

"Then don't believe it because I tell you. Use yore head. Young Howard is no-account but right now dangerous as a trapped rat you try to pet. He'd go the limit to get even. Norris is one of these snake-in-the-grass killers, mean all the way through. Boy, I'm going to tell you something I can't prove. Likely you won't believe me. Morg Norris is the man who tried to kill yore father at Tail Holt. I'm 'most sure of that."

"You're one of this outlaw gang but don't mind throwing down on them when it suits you," jeered Chiswick.

"Smart as a whip, you are," Gray drawled. "You'll never find out whether I am all the kinds of skunk you claim, because inside of twenty-four hours Morg Norris will blast you off the map."

"Maybe he sent you here to scare me. If he did, you go back and tell him I don't scare worth a cent."

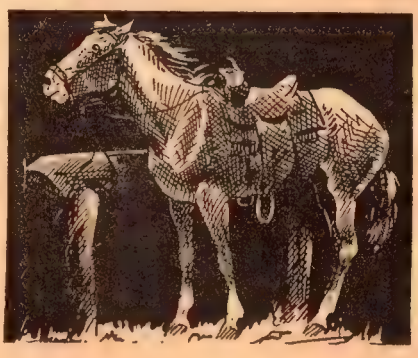
"I give up," Gray said, putting away his weapon. "If you have any last messages you had better write them out. Norris will get you sure. You won't be one-two-three with him."

He turned and walked from the room.

Angrily Frank watched him go. An irritable resentment filled young Chiswick. He had an uneasy feeling that he had been an ungrateful boor. This was absurd. Gray was a villain. He had come here for some evil purpose of his own. No point in letting him fool another of the family. His father and sister were enough.

But there was something about the fellow that didn't tie in with the facts. He did not look like a sneaking scoundrel.

Frank decided to take as few chances as possible. He would sidestep any attempt of Norris or Lou Howard to get



him into a quarrel. Tonight he would stay in his room.

It came to him later that perhaps Gray had been sent by Sherm Howard in the hope of driving him out of town. There might be something doing they did not want him to know about. He would stick around for another day or two at least.

After supper a Mexican came with a message for him. Lee Chiswick, the man said, was at Yell Sanger's store and wanted to see him at once.

"When did my father reach town?" Frank asked.

The man shook his head. "*No sabe, señor.* His horses are at the hitch rack in front of Sanger's."

"Not alone then?"

"Señor Brand is with him."

"Tell him I'll be there *pronto.*"

Frank went back to the bedroom for his hat. He felt as if a load had been rolled from his chest. He would not have to play a lone hand any longer now.

A man coming into the house stepped to one side to let Frank out. The man was Jeff Gray.

"Wait a minute, Chiswick," he said urgently. "They're aiming to ambush you."

Frank did not answer nor did he look back. He was not going to let this fellow influence him. Involuntarily he quickened his pace.

"Come back, you fool!" the crook-nosed man ordered. "They're posted in the cottonwoods over there."

Chiswick did not believe him, but a queer chill ran up and down his spine. He kept going, following an adobe wall parallel to the road.

The angry bark of a revolver sounded. Frank whirled, dragging out his weapon. Swiftly he fired at Gray. He knew the shot had come from the gun of Crook-nose.

From the cottonwoods across the road a rifle cracked. Another boomed before the echo of the first had died.

Frank flung himself at the adobe wall and clambered over it, dropping the .44 from his hand as he swarmed up. The boy hesitated an instant. Should he go back for his revolver or run the great risk of being caught defenseless? He heard the slap of running feet. If he went back over the wall he would be the target of several gunmen.

In the darkness a building loomed before him. It was a large adobe stable, and it filled the whole back of the inclosure. Frank hesitated. He dared not let himself be trapped in the stable. Better go over one of the side walls.

He caught sight of a figure on top of the wall. A man was astride of it. His gun flashed twice. Then he had jumped down into the yard and was running toward Frank.

Amazement filled the mind of Chiswick. The man had not fired at him, but at someone out in the road.

"This way. Into the stable. They'll get you out in the open."

Frank followed him into the building. The man in front of him was Jeff Gray.

"Up the stairs," Gray ordered, stooping to pick something from the ground.

The two men ran up to the loft.

Gray handed Chiswick a crowbar. "Get to work and knock a hole through the wall," he said. "We're going out that way."

Frank pushed aside the hay and began to drive the crowbar into the crumbly adobe bricks. At each thrust the soft wall disintegrated into sand and straw.

Footsteps sounded below. Someone

shouted up a command: "Come down from there, Chiswick, or we'll shoot you into a rag doll."

In a husky voice Frank did not recognize Gray called down an answer: "Three of us are up here. We aim to hold the fort. Don't monkey with us unless a lot of you want to be rubbed out."

"Who are you?" the same man called to them.

"L C men," Gray replied, still in the heavy voice.

"Send down Chiswick and we'll let the rest of you go."

"Go chase yoreself through the brush."

A bullet crashed up through the floor. Gray fired one down in the direction from which it had come. There was a whispered conference below.

"Better give up," the spokesman advised. "We'll sure smoke you out."

Gray played for time. The crowbar was tearing into the wall. "Will you promise not to hurt us if we do?"

"Sure. What would we want to hurt you for? We got a warrant for the arrest of Chiswick for disturbing the peace."

"Give us time to talk it over."

"Well, hurry up. And no monkey business. What's that noise up there?"

There was a rush up the stairs. In the darkness the defenders had all the advantage. Gray's positol whipped the first man and sent him tumbling back against the others. Frank drove the point of the crowbar into the midriff of another. The attackers fell back in disorder. Hurriedly they scampered out of the barn. One of them had to be dragged.

"Back soon," Gray said grimly. "How you getting along with that exit hole?"

With the sleeve of his shirt Frank wiped away the perspiration dripping into his eyes. It was hot in the hay under the roof. "Give me ten minutes more," he panted.

"You don't get ten minutes," Gray told him, and he handed his revolver to the younger man. "Give me that crowbar a while."

With short swift drives the red-haired man slashed at the wall. The point of the crowbar went through. The hole grew larger.

"Why not ten minutes?" Frank said. "Think they'll rush us again?"

"Not none. They'll set fire to the hay below and burn us out."

"Good God!"

"The creek is below. We'll drop down in the brush and slip away—if we're lucky."

"And if we're not?" Frank asked.

His companion pried out an adobe brick. "I've been in a lot worse tights than this," he said.

"Wish it was lighter, so you could see better," Frank replied, emulating the coolness of the other.

Gray stooped and worked at a loose brick with his hands. Someone ran into the barn. From the top of the stairway Chiswick fired.

"Get him?" inquired Gray.

"No. I didn't really see him— He's lit the hay."

The flame leaped up. Through the loose floor it caught the hay in the loft. Frank tried to stamp out the fire. A brick crashed down from the wall into the creek outside.

"The hole is big enough," Gray cried. "Slide out, fellow."

"You first," Chiswick urged.

The smoke was pouring up in great waves.

"Do as I say," the older man ordered.

Frank wriggled through and drop-

ped. The heat and smoke were almost unbearable. Gray worked his legs and body into the open. He dropped, landed on a stone, and rolled over and over into the bed of the dry creek.

"All right?" Chiswick asked, in a whisper.

"Yes," Gray snapped. "This way."

The fugitives were brought up by a barbed wire fence stretching across the creek. They crept between the strands.

Chapter Sixteen

Alibis

STANDING in a clump of mesquite on the edge of the creek, Gray said, "Ready to leave town yet? Or am I still too big a liar to believe?"

"I don't know what you are," Frank answered. "Hadn't been for you they would have got me. But you fired the first shot at me."

"You were walking right into their ambush. I fired to stop you. It started them up before you were close enough to hit in the darkness."

Frank was still suspicious. "You disguised your voice when you talked with them in the barn."

"So I did. I'm staying here. Would you want me to yell out my name to them?"

"You saved my life. No two ways about that. At the risk of yore own."

"Oh hell!" Gray said. "Someone has to look after you. Where's yore horse?"

"At the Alamo Corral."

"Then get down there and saddle. Hit the trail for the L C. Quick as you can."

The younger man agreed. "I'm much obliged," he added gruffly. "I won't forget it."

Gray watched him go, then cut across to the main street and joined those who were hurrying to the fire. He saw the roof of the barn crash in as he climbed over the wall.

His gaze swept the crowd. He caught sight of Morgan Norris and joined him.

"How'd the fire start?" he asked.

Norris slid a look at him. "How would I know?"

"Thought maybe you were among those here early," Gray said lightly.

"No, sir, I wasn't."

The eyes of Norris were slits of shining light. This business tonight had got out of hand, and he had to watch his step. He had started out to kill one man, not three. Now there would be war to a finish with the L C outfit. There would be an outcry all over Arizona against those who had destroyed the men in the barn. Already he had an alibi framed for the four attackers. They had been playing seven-up in his cabin when they heard cries of "Fire!" That was the story he and the other three had agreed to stand on.

"Thought I heard some shooting," Gray said guilelessly. "I was down at Ma Presnall's fixing to turn in when things began to pop."

"I reckon some drunk was punctuating the scenery," Norris said, watching his words. "Me, I was playing seven-up with some of the boys."

"Likely some lad was bedding down in the hay and lit it from his cigarette," Gray suggested.

"Might be that way. If so, hope he got out."

A *vaquero* known as Kansas sidled up to them. "Fire's burnin' out," he said to Norris.

Gray read fear in the man's shifty eyes. He decided that Kansas had been one of those involved in the attack.

"Morg and I were just hoping nobody got caught in there," Gray told the cowboy.

The startled eyes of Kansas stabbed at Norris. "Why would there be anybody in there?" he asked hoarsely. "You don't figure that—that—"

"We don't figure a thing," Norris answered, his cold gaze fixing Kansas. "Crook-nose here allowed that maybe someone sleeping in the hay might have lit it from a cigarette."

"Gray is the name, if you're meanin' me," the redheaded man drawled gently. His steady gaze warned the other that he was treading on dangerous ground.

"Well, the show's over," Norris said. "I'm headin' back to the seven-up game. You comin' along, Kansas?"

Gray watched them go. *That's two of them*, he thought. *Lou Howard is probably another.*

He walked up the main street to the Golden Nugget and sat in on a poker game.

Chapter Seventeen

Howard Reads the Riot Act

SHERM HOWARD slammed a big fist down on the table in front of him.

"Never saw anything more crazy in my life. That's no way to get a man—lie in wait for him right here in town so Lee Chiswick will know some of us must have done it. On top of that, you bump off three men instead of one. Bad medicine, Morg. These aren't the old days. We got to be more careful what we do."

"Ride yore son Lou," Norris said sulkily. "He was in it deep as any of the rest of us."

"I'll ride you all. It was the damnedest-fool thing I ever heard of white men doing. We'll never hear the end of it. Were you all drunk?"

"Not drunk. We'd been drinking some." Norris explained resentfully. "Not our fault three of them got caught. We laid for young Chiswick. The other two popped up out of nowhere. Nobody knows who they were. They got what was comin' to them for buttin' in to a game where they weren't invited."

"Soon as the heat of the fire dies down enough rake the ashes, get the skeletons, hustle them off into the brush, and bury them," ordered Howard. "See you keep your mouths shut, every last one of you. Lay off liquor for a while, get out of town, and hole up in the hills until the talk dies down. I'm going to have a job for you in a few days. You've put ropes round your necks, all four of you. If you're not careful, some sheriff is going to jerk those ropes tight. Understand?"

"We didn't aim to burn 'em," Lou Howard whined. "We told them to come out so we could arrest Frank Chiswick."

"Arrest nothing," Norris said, snarling at young Howard. "We aimed to put him outa business."

"You're damn whistling we meant to rub him out," Kansas admitted despondently. "But like Lou says we didn't mean to burn him. The idea was to blast him as he walked up to Sanger's from the boarding-house. And we didn't figure on the two other guys who busted in and took chips."

"When did they come to town?" Howard snapped. "Who saw them after they got here? Who were they?"

"I wouldn't know the answer to any of those questions, Sherm," answered

Norris, sulkily defiant. "Better ask Lou. It was his party. Maybe he knows."

The opaque eyes of the older Howard rested on his son, not without contempt. It was plain that Lou was sweating fear.

"Might funny about these two mysterious L C men," he said, thinking aloud. "What did they come here for? Where did they leave their mounts?"

"Search me," Kansas replied. "I didn't see but one of 'em."

"How do you know there were two? Who saw the other? Did you, Morg?" challenged Howard.

"Sure I saw him. He was in the barn. Up in the loft. Saw him when we rushed the stairs." Norris tenderly rubbed the side of his head, where he had been pistol-whipped during that rush. To him it seemed that the loft had been full of defenders.

"But you don't know who he was."

"No, I don't. It was black as a *manzanita* gulch in the dark of the moon. No way of telling who was roosting up there."

"Hmp! Something here I don't get. Looks like Lee Chiswick has a card up his sleeve."

A knock sounded on the door. Sherm Howard barked, "Come in!"

Jim Reynolds, owner of the Alamo Corral, walked into the room. He was a short, thick-set man with slanted eyebrows that always seemed to be asking a question. He nodded a casual greeting.

"Just happened to be passing, Sherm," he said. "Don't know as it's important, but I thought I'd let you know young Chiswick has left town."

Five men stared at him, for the moment struck dumb. Then their questions tumbled out.

"When?" gasped one; and another: "What Chiswick?" Sherman Howard rasped, "Who told you?"

Reynolds looked round, surprised at the amazement his simple announcement had created. "Nobody told me. I saw him saddle and start. Less than fifteen minutes ago. Frank Chiswick, of course. He's the one that was in town. What's the matter, boys?"

"Sure it was Frank, not his brother?" Norris asked.

One of the eyebrows of the owner of the Alamo tilted to an angle. "I'd ought to know. Known 'em both since they were kids. He was in some hurry. Lit out like the heel flies were after him."

"Anyone with him?" questioned the older Howard.

"No, sir."

"Was he—hurt?" Lou said, his voice husky.

"Not so I noticed it, but he sure drug it for home on the jump."

"No other L C riders had left their horses at the corral?" Sherm probed harshly.

"Nary a one. He was the only L C man in town."

"So you say." The laugh of Norris was jangled and mirthless. "I've got a headache that is telling me different."

"I reckon I'm not in on this, boys," Reynolds said. "I heard shooting a while ago. Were you boys in a mix-up with L C men?"

"No," answered Sherman Howard curtly, cutting off discussion. "Nothing like that. Much obliged, Jim. Glad this young rooster has flown the coop."

After Reynolds had gone the big man turned on the others with bitter sarcasm. "Now we don't know where we are at. You're a fine bunch of warriors. All four of you plugging at this Chiswick and he gets off scot-free. You'd

better find out soon as you can about the other two fellows who were with Frank. Was there a back door to this stable?"

"No, there wasn't," Norris said sullenly. "I don't see—" He stopped, a sudden gleam in his smoky eyes.

"Well?" asked Sherm.

"They kept making a noise upstairs in the loft—some kind of pounding." Morg ripped out a vicious oath. "I'll bet they knocked a hole in the 'dobe wall and got away."

"Sounds reasonable," jeered their leader. "You boys were having such a good time at the fire you never thought to watch the back of the barn."

"Why should we, Sherm, when there was no door and no window?" Kansas protested.

"All right. Go find out the facts," ordered Howard.

Twenty minutes later his men reported that there were no bodies in the ashes and that a hole had been knocked in the stable wall.

Chapter Eighteen

Mostly About Jeff Gray

FRANK CHISWICK swung from the saddle stiffly.

"How's every little thing?" his brother Bob asked.

"All right with me."

"Anything doing at Tail Holt, Frank?"

"Plenty. Where's the old man?"

"In the house writing a letter."

Frank unsaddled and turned his horse into a pasture.

"Better come along and listen to my story," he said.

From a kitchen window Ruth saw her brothers and followed them into the office.

"'Lo, Frank," she said. "You haven't changed much. We still have the same old cat."

"You came mighty near not having the same old brother," he told her with a grin.

"Had some trouble, did you?" Lee inquired.

"Some. Maybe it was my own fault. I had a fight. I've been shot at several times. I was cornered in a hay loft when the stable was on fire. A fellow who calls himself Jeff Gray saved my life."

The family stared at him.

"Sit down, son, and tell it," his father suggested after he had found speech.

When Frank reached in his narrative the fight with Lou Howard his sister cut in sharply.

"I told you to leave him alone—that it was my fault as much as his," she scolded. "Now you've made more trouble."

"Sorry it came out that way," Frank said.

"You did right, son," his father approved. "I hope you whopped him good."

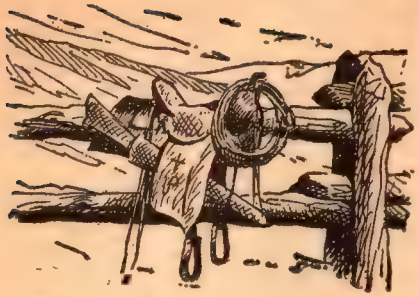
"He wouldn't fight—not to amount to anything," Frank said simply. "But I marked him up considerable. I reckon he made up his mind to have me rubbed out and took that killer Morg Norris in with him. They had two or three others along."

"Along when?" Bob asked.

"When they ambushed me."

"You recognized Howard and Norris?" Lee said.

"No, I didn't. No time for that. Jeff Gray warned me they were intending to bushwhack me."



"That scoundrel," Lee cried.

"Wouldn't it be a good idea to hear Frank's story?" Ruth interposed.

"Gray came to my room after the fight," Frank continued. "I ordered him to leave and when he wouldn't go started across the room for my gun. He whipped out his revolver and told me to hold my horses while he talked. Seems he had overheard some talk between Morg Norris and Lou Howard. Lou was crazy mad because I had licked him. Morg said they might as well settle my hash now as later. I wouldn't believe a word Gray said and told him so. After supper I got a message you were at Yell Sanger's and was waiting there for me. I started up the street and Gray tried to stop me, saying I was walking into a trap set for me, and when I kept going he fired a gun to stop me."

"Fired at you?" Ruth asked breathlessly.

"I thought so, but it wasn't that way. He knew if I kept going the fellows lying in the cottonwoods across the street would blast me out of existence. When I stopped they cut loose. I went over a 'dobe wall and dropped my gun. Couldn't go back for it with them all plugging at me. I was in a lot with a stable at the back. Someone swarmed over the wall after me and fired twice, not at me but at the fellows in the street. It was Jeff Gray. We ran up into the stable loft."

"Then what?" Ruth asked tensely.

Frank finished his story.

"Son, I ought never to have sent you to town alone," exclaimed Lee. "I knew there were a lot of bad *hombres* in that bunch of rustlers, but I didn't think they would go so far as to try to burn a boy to death. Well, I've had my lesson. I might have known that any outfit bossed by Sherm Howard would be rotten. About this fellow Gray. I don't get him at all. We no sooner get him pegged for a double-crossing scoundrel than he up and goes into the fire for you. What's his game? Who in time is he?"

"Two or three times I heard that he was an outlaw wanted in Texas for robbing a train," Frank said. "Name of Clint Doke, it was claimed. He's in with Howard's gang somehow. In the barn he changed his voice so they wouldn't know who he is."

"He can't be all bad," Ruth broke in, her eyes shining like stars. "I knew it all the time, only all the evidence was against him."

"That's all very well, daughter," Lee assented. "I'll grant you he isn't a villain like that killer Morg Norris. We sure owe him a lot on account of what he did for Frank. But likely he's that train robber they want in Texas. Must be some reason he's hiding here. You don't want to get too sympathetic to him."

"No, if we get a chance we might arrest him and send him back to Texas," Ruth suggested scornfully. "There must be a reward for him."

"Now—now! No use getting hoity-toity, miss. He can come and stay at the L C long as he wants. We'll do all we can for him, since we don't know he

is an outlaw," her father said.

"And if we find he is we can kick him out," the girl added. "All he has done is save most of our lives."

Lee turned on her resentfully. He understood exactly how she felt. His own personal sense of obligation was in conflict with his public one.

"What would you expect me to do?" he demanded. "I rode the brush country for years cleaning out desperadoes and thieves. Do you want me to go back on my life record and throw in with scoundrels who rob trains just because I'm under a personal obligation to them? This man Gray is a tough citizen. Don't make any mistake about that. He is probably a killer and an outlaw. Right now he is in cahoots with my enemies. A few days ago he helped them run off some of my stock. If it's put up to me I'll give him the benefit of any doubt there is, but I won't go any farther."

"He must be a Christian outlaw, one who believes in doing good to those who despitefully use him," Ruth said. "It's too bad we couldn't get some more enemies like him. Every time someone tries to kill us he is on hand to prevent it. Your turn next, Bob, to have this bad man act the good Samaritan to you."

Her father grinned ruefully. "You're sure a gadfly, missy. You talk like I was starting right out to hunt this fellow down. No sense in getting all steamed up about it. If we get a chance to help him we will."

Ruth nodded. She knew her father would pay the family debt if he was given a chance. For herself, she felt a great lift of relief at what her brother had told them. She desperately wanted to believe in Jeff Gray, to get assurance at least that he was not mean and treacherous. A queer joy flooded her heart.

Chapter Nineteen

Breakfast at the L C

JEFF GRAY fitted himself easily into the life of Tail Holt. The atmosphere of the place induced indolence. Nobody was in a hurry. Each day had twenty-four hours, to be spent in eating, drinking, loafing, sleeping, and finding diversion. Gray sat on his heels for hours at the Alamo Corral, sometimes chatting with Jim Reynolds or some waddy down from the hills, at other times apparently drowsing in a coma of listlessness. Frequently he dropped into the blacksmith's shop of Hank Ransom and listened to tall stories of the days when Hank had campaigned against the Apaches under Generals Crook and Miles. He struck up an acquaintance with the cobbler, little Ed Godfrey. Although no drinking man, he was a regular at the Golden Nugget poker table.

He showed no curiosity about those he met. When they came and went, where they lived, what their ostensible occupations were, held no visible interest for him. He accepted each man for what he gave himself out to be. The riders drifting in and out no longer looked at him suspiciously. Curly Connor liked him, and Curly was a leader. The only man who seemed to resent his presence was Morg Norris.

Gray noticed that the men in high-heeled boots and shiny leathers no longer ceased their talk at his approach. They confided no secrets about specific crimes, but their casual words

were an admission they lived outside the law.

Sensitive to atmospheres, Gray deduced one day that something unusual was in the air. He saw Norris in momentary furtive talk with Sherman Howard. The big man was giving the other instructions. Norris picked up Kansas and took him out of the Golden Nugget with him. Mile High came in, held a low-voiced conversation with Howard, and departed.

Presently Gray announced, with a yawn, "Tired of poker," and cashed in his chips. He strolled down to the Alamo Corral. Sid Hunt and Kansas were saddling their horses. One of them tied back of the saddle a gunny sack containing oats.

"What about that lame sorrel, Sid?" asked Reynolds. "You be back tonight?"

"You look after it, Jim," Hunt said. "Don't look for us till you see our dust coming up the road."

"We got a hen on down Live Oak canyon way," Kansas said with a grin.

Back of the horse Hunt kicked him on the ankle, and Kansas added a rider to his indiscreet remark: "Or somewheres else."

Gray watched them ride out of town. They took the road to the west, the one Lee Chiswick and his daughter had followed the night of their adventure in front of Sanger's store. Half an hour later Norris, Mile High, and young Howard left Tail Holt headed in the same direction.

Darkness was falling when Jeff Gray rode out of town. He had never been in Live Oak canyon, but he knew from Pat Sorley that it was on the L C Range, three or four miles southwest of the line cabin.

It was possible Kansas had mentioned the canyon to fool him and Reynolds, but he did not think so. Kansas was notoriously slack-mouth and unable to keep a secret.

Granting that he had named the real destination of the party, the object of the expedition puzzled Gray. Were the night riders out to make a raid on L C cattle? That was possible. But why cross twenty miles of Chiswick's range into hill country when plenty of stock could be picked up in the Sweet Spring Valley with a much shorter drive to safety?

As he rode through the darkness, his mind focused on the problem, another likelihood flashed upon Gray. Occasionally smugglers from Sonora brought silver to Tough Nut to buy goods for consumption in Mexico, thus escaping the Mexican export duty on silver and the import duty on merchandise. In such illicit trading there was a fat profit. Between El Paso and Nogales there was no port of entry. One of the routes followed by smugglers wound through Live Oak Canyon. From it the descent to Tough Nut was by an easy grade.

The longer he thought of it the more convinced he was that the raid was against smugglers. A pack horse had accompanied the Norris party, probably to carry back the silver. Moreover, the personnel of the group pointed to something other than cattle stealing. Neither young Howard nor Kansas were top hands with cows. Why bring them along and leave an expert like Curly at home?

From chance remarks Gray had gathered that Curly was the leader of the rustler group. But Curly was no wanton killer. He would not shoot down a bunch of men without giving them a chance for their lives. With the exception of Lou Howard all five of these

men were gun fighters. No doubt Lou was with them to protect his father's interest.

Gray did not ride straight for the canyon but took the road that led to the L C ranch house. The Chiswicks would know much better than he what to do, since they were familiar with the terrain.

It was in the small hours when he reached the ranch. At his approach to the house a dog barked furiously. Presently someone opened the front door and came out on the porch. A voice demanded: "Who's there?"

"Tell Lee Chiswick that Jeff Gray wants to see him," the night visitor answered, at the same time swinging from the saddle on the far side of the horse.

There was a moment of silence. "What do you want with him?" Bob Chiswick asked.

"I'll tell him that when I see him," Gray said dryly. "You run along in and tell him I'm here."

A head was thrust out of an upper window. "Who is it, Bob?"

"Says he is Jeff Gray, Father," Bob called up.

"Wait a minute." The head was withdrawn.

Five minutes later Lee Chiswick stepped out on the porch. Gray told him why he was there.

To his son Lee said, "Light a lamp in my office, Bob." To Gray: "Tie your horse and come in."

Gray followed the cattleman into his office and took the chair to which his host waved him. Lee sat across the table from him. Young Chiswick remained standing.

"First off, Mr. Jeff Gray, if that's your name, let's get it clear where you stand." Lee leaned back in the chair, his steady blue eyes fastened on the man opposite. "I'll ask you to come clean, sir. Are you one of Sherm Howard's scoundrels?"

"Would I be here if I were?" Gray asked.

Ruth stood in the doorway, her dark eyes dilated with surprise. She had flung a wrap over her nightgown and she held it caught close to her slender graceful body. Above the slippers into which her feet had been thrust there was a glimpse of white ankle.

"I'm not asking for a Yankee answer, sir," Lee said impatiently.

"I'm not giving you one," Gray told him curtly. "I've been in the saddle all night to bring you the tipoff. Take it or leave it."

"There's a story in Tail Holt that you are Clint Doke, the fellow who robbed the Texas and Southern," persisted Lee.

"Not much time for gossip right now if we aim to head off those scalawags," Gray said.

Ruth broke in to the talk. "I don't believe it. I don't think Mr. Gray is a train robber or a rustler, Father. Look what he did for Frank."

Her father turned in his chair. "Might have known you'd be butting in," he scolded.

"I heard voices," she explained. "And I came down to see who it was."

"Now you know you can go back to bed," Lee told her crustily.

"Not just yet, please." Gray smiled blandly. "I'm gaunt as a steer after a long drive. Since you're so sure I'm innocent, Miss Chiswick, how about a cup of coffee and some ham and eggs? I'll have just time for them before we start if you move lively."

"Start where?" she asked.

Lee said, "Go ahead, girl. Fix him

some food." He added, to his son, "Rout Frank and Dan Brand and Buck Conrad out of their beds. See they get horses saddled."

Before she left to make breakfast Ruth flung a question at Gray. "You *are* innocent, aren't you?"

"I never blocked a brand or ran one over. I never bought or sold a wet horse."

"And you're not this Clint Doke that's wanted for robbery and murder?"

"Gray is the name," he reproached suavely. "Jefferson Gray."

"Did you hear me tell you to rustle some grub, Ruth?" her father asked harshly. "Better fix breakfast for all of us. No telling when we'll eat again."

Ruth vanished. Presently they could hear the rattling of stove lids and the crackling of wood.

"I don't know how to take you," Lee complained. "You certainly came through for Frank when he needed a friend. You claim you're not one of Howard's thieves, but you were with them when they ran that bunch of L C stuff up the box canyon. Pat Sorley checked up on your horse's hoofs."

"He didn't check up well enough. I went up the gulch *after* the thieves, not *with* them. They passed close to the line camp in the night. I heard them and went out to see who they were. Pat hadn't been feeling well the night before, so I didn't wake him but followed the rustlers alone."

"You're a detective for the cattlemen's association. That what you mean?"

"You can do yore own guessing. Right now I'm giving no information."

Chiswick threw out a hand in a gesture of defeat. "All right. Have it your own way. I'll take a chance on you. If you're right about it and this bunch you followed are headed for Live Oak Canyon it's a cinch they're not figuring on running off any of my stock. My guess is the same as yours. They have heard word of some silver smugglers on their way to Tough Nut. Probably they will lie in wait for them at the rock slide. It's a fine spot for an ambush. Question is, can we get to the smugglers before they reach the canyon?"

"If not, they will probably be wiped out. You know that killer Morg Norris. He'll figure dead men tell no tales."

"Yes. Three smugglers were drygulched and killed last year. In Skeleton Canyon, not in Live Oak. Norris was in that, they say."

"Howard must have a spy in Mexico who is in with the smugglers."

"Looks like," Chiswick agreed.

Presently Frank Chiswick came into the room. He told his father that the horses were being caught and saddled. "Tony Flores stayed at the bunkhouse last night. Do you want him to go?"

"I reckon so. How many rifles all told?"

"Four. Counting the buffalo gun."

The other men trooped into the house for breakfast. They ate by the light of lamps, Ruth and Nelly waiting on them. Plate after plate of biscuits vanished before them. Platters of fried eggs appeared and disappeared. Nelly poured great quantities of coffee.

Observing Jefferson Gray, Ruth noticed that he had the table manners of one who has been taught. He was hard as steel, but he was not gross. His soft drawling voice was grave and cultivated. Outside of perfunctory thanks he gave her very little attention, but she was intensely aware of him. There was an essentially masculine quality in his

schooled strength that seemed to reach out and drew her to him.

After breakfast Gray drew Lee Chiswick aside. "Maybe we're figuring this thing out wrong," he said. "Maybe when Kansas let slip Live Oak Canyon that was just bait for me. Don't you reckon you had better leave a guard at the ranch to look after the women?"

Lee considered this. "No. Men in this country don't make war on women."

Another possibility was in the cattleman's mind, a more likely one, he felt. Gray might have been sent here to draw him and his men out of the valley into the hills to give the rustlers a free field of operations. But Lee did not believe it. He had come to the opinion that the crook-nosed man was a detective from the cattlemen's association. Anyhow, Chiswick meant to take a chance on him. A man cannot very well ride two horses at the same time.

Chapter Twenty

In Live Oak Canyon

GRAY rode with Lee Chiswick at the head of the little cavalcade.

"Wish we weren't following such a blind trail," he said. "We don't know for sure Norris is laying for smugglers. Or if he is, when or where. You say it will take five or six hours to reach the lower mouth of the canyon if we have to go round and not through it. By that time it may be too late to save these Mexicans."

"That's so," assented Chiswick.

"Why not try the upper entrance to the canyon first? We could see by the tracks if Norris's party has gone in yet."

"We might run into them," Lee said. "That wouldn't be so good. Still, we've got to take a chance. I'm heading for the upper end of Live Oak now."

They came into rough country, a wild jumble of hills and draws which made for slow and hard going. In the darkness the horses felt their own way. From the summit of one of the hills Chiswick pointed down to a gash in the rock wall facing them.

"Canyon Diablo," he said. "That was the Spanish name. We call it Live Oak now."

Gray took the nearness of the canyon on faith. Not even the rock wall could be seen.

Chiswick left the rest of his party in a mesquite draw while he and Gray rode forward to reconnoiter. The younger man carried Dan Brand's rifle, since he had not one of his own. They rode cautiously, searching the darkness in front of them with their eyes as they moved forward.

Neither of them saw any sign of another party. Back of a small elevation fifty yards from the mouth of Live Oak Canyon they tied their mounts. Very carefully they covered the remaining distance. Safely they reached the trail.

"They're ahead of us." Gray pointed to fresh tracks.

They examined the footprints, striking matches as they stooped to make out the impressions. One horse had a broken front hoof. Another wore very large shoes and stepped a long way.

"I've seen both of those tracks before," Chiswick said.

"The horses that made them belong to Morg Norris and Mile High," Gray replied.

Chiswick called to the rest of his posse and the others joined them. Brand recovered his rifle from the

redheaded man.

"Norris and his crowd are in the canyon, boys," Lee said. "We are going in after them. But get this right. We have no evidence as to why they are here. So we can't cut loose at them promiscuous. Maybe they'll show their hand before we reach them. Anyhow, till I give the word there isn't to be any gunplay."

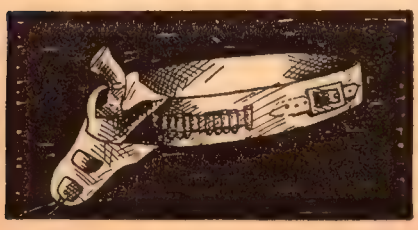
"How many of them are there?" asked Buck Conrad, chewing tobacco stolidly.

"Five of them, far as we know," Lee answered. "We're kind of in a hole, boys. If we jump up this bunch of wolves before the smugglers arrive they can give us the horse laugh and say they just rode out for a picnic. If we don't show up till after the Mexicans, the smugglers are liable to be rubbed out. We'll have to just jog along and hope for the best."

Gray dawn was beginning to sift into the darkness and bleach it with light. Lee held the lead, Jeff Gray at his heels. They traveled slowly through the rough canyon, the horses picking their way among the rocks and the brush. The throats of the riders were dry, from the tensity of repressed excitement.

Day poured down into the canyon. In an incredibly short space of time nothing was left of the blackness of night but a swirling mist.

The leader drew up his horse. "Getting close to the rock slide," he said evenly. "They may be there or they may not. We're fixed so we have to guess at what these fellows want." Lee's glance rested for a moment on Gray. "Maybe I'm the one who is to fall into the trap and this talk of smugglers doesn't mean a thing. Ride as loose as you can, boys. Not too close together. If they fire at us we'll hunt cover, each man for himself."



"Wouldn't it be better for one of us to crawl forward on foot and have a look-see?" Brand suggested.

From round a bend in the gulch there came the crack of a gun. Before the echo died away a fusillade followed.

"We're too late," Chiswick cried. "Come on, boys."

He slid from the saddle and ran toward the bend, moving with the heaviness that comes from middle age. Gray passed him before he was halfway to the turn.

The scene Gray looked upon as he rounded the curve was one of the wildest confusion. Frightened by the firing, two saddled horses were bucking wildly in the dry bed of the stream. The men who had been riding them lay on the ground, one of them face down and the other in a twisted heap. Two others in Mexican costume were racing down the canyon to escape while three masked men shot at them with rifles as they ran. Another masked man was struggling with a pitching mule.

Gray flung a bullet at the nearest of the marksmen. The man whirled, caught sight of him, and ripped out a startled oath. He gave a cry of warning, fired once wildly toward the men pouring round the bend, and turned to run. He caught at the bridle of one of the plunging horses and tried to

mount. A bullet struck the pommel of the saddle to which he was clinging. With a yell of terror he let go and flew down the gorge, dodging in and out of the rocks as he went. Though the face of the man was covered by a bandanna except for the eyes, Gray recognized him as young Howard.

Taken by surprise, the other bandits thought only of flight. One ran limping to a horse, pulled himself to the saddle, and galloped off. Another plunged to the ground, as if he had stumbled, but did not rise again. The remaining two, penned in the rocks, answered the fire of the attackers.

"Get to cover, boys," Lee ordered. "We'll drive them into the open. Don't take any chances."

A saddled horse, snorting with fear, came out from the big boulders close to the spot where the two masked men crouched. The nearest outlaw seized the bridle and mounted. His companion clambered on behind, and the animal dashed down the canyon.

"Bring up the horses," the ex-captain of rangers called to his son Frank. "We'll take after these fellows."

He moved forward to check the casualties. Two Mexicans were dead, as was also one of the outlaws. None of the Chiswick party had been hurt. The unexpected attack had sent their foes into panic.

Gray turned over the body of the masked man lying in the sand. He recognized the face of Sid Hunt.

"He worked for me when he first started riding," Brand said, looking down at the boyish face. "He was a nice kid then, friendly and decent. I hate to see him come to this."

The crook-nosed man helped himself to the dead man's rifle and cartridge belt. He caught one of the horses left by the outlaws and started down the gulch.

"Better wait for the orders of the old man," Brand advised.

"I'll just ride ahead and keep in touch with these fellows," Gray called back.

He passed a laden pack mule. Part of the load was silver, he guessed. The mule had got over its fright and was picking at the shrubbery.

After he was through the boulder field he put his mount to a canter, regardless of the brush which caught at him as he ploughed into the chaparral. He was riding the gray gelding upon which he had seen Morg Norris leave town.

Presently he saw in front of him a man on foot. Sometimes the man was running, sometimes walking. In the space of three or four minutes he looked back a dozen times. As Gray drew nearer, the fugitive took refuge behind a mesquite.

"Don't you come any closer," he warned, his voice quavery with terror. It was Lou Howard.

"Reach for the sky," Gray ordered. "No funny business or I'll drill you through."

A bullet whistled past his head. He swung from the saddle and moved forward. In his hand was a .44 ready for action. The rifle he had left beside the horse.

"Don't you," shrieked Howard. "You keep back."

"Get 'em up," snapped Gray. "Quick."

The hands of Howard went up, the weapon in one of them. "Don't kill me," he begged.

Gray disarmed him. "You'll be safer tied up," the captor said. "Keep you from being killed by one of the boys when they get to you. Move over this way."

The crook-nosed man took the rope from the saddle and tied up Howard swiftly and thoroughly. He left him lying in an open place on the trail.

A quarter of a mile farther down the canyon there ran into it a steep rocky gulch narrow as a Titan's sword cleft. Far up this Gray could see two men and a horse. One of them was riding, the other clambering along the trail after him.

He turned up the gulch after them. The horse took the narrow bed of the trough like a cat, its muscles standing out hard as steel while it reached from one foothold to another. A bullet ricochetted from a flat rock above Gray and plowed into the rubble close to the front hoofs of the gelding. The sound of the explosion came down in booming echoes.

Gray did not stop. He did not answer the fire. The fugitives were moving again. They were not looking for a fight. What they wanted was to reach the flat country just ahead of them where they could disappear into some of the hill folds that ran down to the plateau.

The men and the horse vanished above the brow of the gulch. Gray gave his mount no rest. He had to reach the summit while they were still in sight. The animal he rode was strong and willing. Heaving with exertion, it came to the top of the rocky gash. Its rider had a shaky moment when the horse clawed its way to level ground.

His glance swept swiftly the country in front of him. The men had gone. One of the draws in front of him had swallowed them up. Which one, he could not guess.

One point stuck out like a sore thumb. In this country a man without a horse was in poor plight. The first consideration of these fugitives would be to get another mount. They would strike for the nearest place where a pony could be picked up with safety.

The answer struck Jeff Gray almost with the force of a blow. That nearest place was the L C ranch house. Nobody would be at the ranch except women. Almost certainly the outlaws would ride straight to the L C.

Jeff rode to the nearest rise and looked around. He was surrounded by a huddle of round-topped hills. The ranch must be north and east of where he stood. But how much north and how far east? All he could do was guess.

Heavy-hearted, he started on his way. He might lose an hour or more wandering among the hills, and just now every minute counted. One of the two men he had followed was Morg Norris, unless he was much mistaken. The fellow would be in the vilest of tempers.

Chapter Twenty-One

Norris Gives Orders

RUTH spent some anxious restless hours. She found herself on the front porch a dozen times, her gaze sweeping down the road to look for the returning posse. Repeatedly she told herself there was no need to worry.

She was not at all afraid of treachery. Jeff Gray was no traitor, whatever other faults he might have. Ruth would have staked all she had on that.

With Nelly's help she laid in a supply of cooked food for the returning warriors. Whether successful or the reverse, they would certainly be hungry. It was Nelly who first saw the ap-

proaching rider.

"Someone coming this way," she called to her mistress.

Swiftly Ruth went to the door. A horse was cantering heavily up the road. The distance was too far for identification of either man or beast, but there was something unusual about the gait of the animal. Unless very tired it ought not to make such heavy going. Presently she made a discovery. A second rider sat behind the first.

A pulse began to beat in Ruth's throat. Something was wrong. She ran down the steps and hurried toward those approaching the house.

They were close upon her before she realized they were not from her father's party. She stopped, abruptly, looking at them intently. The man in front she did not know. The other swung to the ground and came toward her. A cold wind swept through her.

"Nice to meet up with you again, missy," he said.

"Who are you?" she asked, dread in her heart.

But she knew who he was. She had seen him at Tail Holt just before and after her father had been wounded. His name was Morgan Norris, and he was the man Jeff Gray suspected of firing the shot.

"Never mind the name. Just call me one of yore admirers. First off, we want horses. While Kansas is catching and saddling I'll help you get some food together. We're in some hurry, and we'll take it with us."

"What's happened?" the girl asked, her eyes on the bloodstained handkerchief tied around his left arm below the elbow.

Norris ripped out a violent obscene oath. "Keep yore trap shut, girl, and do like I say," he ordered.

"You've been hurt—wounded," she cried. "There has been trouble." Her eyes were big with fear.

"Ambushed by yore rotten kin," he snarled. "Shot down when we weren't lookin' for it, when we didn't have a chance."

"That's not true," she flung back at him. "I know my father too well to believe it."

He moved closer. "Don't tell me I'm a liar, you vixen," he ground out angrily. "They jumped us in Live Oak Canyon. Shot us down without giving us any show at all. I aim to get even. First, you push along ahead of me to the house and fix up that grub. *Pronto.*"

Ruth looked into his bleak eyes, the focal points of a cruel savage face, and knew what it was to be afraid. She turned and walked to the house, the man beside her. He caught hold of her arm just above the elbow.

"Let me alone," Ruth told him. "Take your hand off me."

"It's my say-so," he retorted, with an evil laugh. "What orders are given will come from me, sweetheart."

With an effort she wrenched herself free. "No," she challenged. "You daren't harm me. If you did you'd be trapped and wiped out like a wolf."

"Would I? We'll see about that," he purred softly.

He was playing with a dangerous thought, one that had just come into his mind. Could he use her, as a protection and as a means of revenge? If he took her with him would he increase or decrease the peril of the situation in which he stood? He was not sure whether he had been recognized; if so, he might have to get out of this part of the country.

Norris went into the house with her. "This man wants to take some food

with him, Nelly," said Ruth.

Nelly looked at him out of startled eyes.

"Get a move on you," he snapped. "I'm in a hurry."

While Ruth packed the food they had just been cooking the outlaw sat astride a chair in the kitchen with his arm across the back of it. He watched her with narrowed eyes, primal fires flaming smokily in them.

The slender grace of her figure, its fine spirited racehorse look, stirred a tumult in him. At Tail Holt, the first time he had ever seen the girl, he had noticed the way she walked, as though life, the mere living, sang a song in her veins. Since that day in town the memory had come back to him a hundred times. She was amazingly desirable and, since she was a woman, could be won. Of his power over the other sex he was inordinately vain. If he could persuade her to marry him he would be in a strong position to defy Lee Chiswick. News of her flirtations had drifted to him more than once. He would show her a lover not to be resisted.

Kansas came into the kitchen. "I roped and saddled two cow ponies," he said.

"We'll need four," Norris answered.

"Four. What for?" Kansas asked.

"We're going to take these girls with us."

The other three in the room stared at Norris, Kansas with incredulity, the young women with gripping fear.

"The hell we are," Kansas retorted. "You gone crazy from yore wound?"

"They'll be a protection to us," Norris insisted.

"What's eating you, Morg? This whole country would rise up and wipe us out. Use yore head."

The eyes of the killer glittered. He said softly, "Saddle two more horses."

Kansas felt a chill run down his back. "Good God, Morg—"

"Make tracks, fellow," Norris interrupted.

"Looky here," Kansas explained, tiny drops of sweat on his forehead. "Get me right, Morg. We're friends, you'n' me. All I'm saying is—"

"Don't say it," Norris cut in again. "Go saddle the broncs."

Kansas backed out of the room. "All right, Morg. All right. Just as you say. I sure ain't lookin' for trouble with you."

Ruth said to Norris, keeping her voice steady with an effort, "You wouldn't do that to two girls."

Scowling at her, he answered harshly, "Don't fool yoreself."

"In this country men respect a decent woman," she urged desperately, already aware of the futility of such an appeal to him.

"I'm not Curly Connor," he replied with a hateful smile. "What I want I take. You're going with me, understand. Maybe, if you're good, I'll make you Mrs. Morgan Norris." His gaze swept the room. "Where's the other wench gone?" he demanded harshly.

Nelly had slipped out of the room a minute earlier, as inconspicuously as a shadow. Evenly her mistress said, "I expect she has gone to the smokehouse for a slab of bacon."

"You'll have to take some heavier clothes, both of you," Norris mentioned, accepting the explanation without question. "Go to yore room and pick them. I'll drift along with you."

"I'm not going with you," Ruth said firmly. "You must be crazy to suggest it. Men don't make war on women. Not sane men."

"This won't be war, honey," Norris

insinuated. "Nothing like that a-tall."

A wild fear fluttered in her heart. "I'm not going, I tell you."

He caught her wrist and twisted it till she went down on her knees to escape the dreadful pain.

"Don't! Don't!" she begged.

"I'm boss," he said, showing his teeth in a snarl. "Get that from right damn now."

She shivered. "I'll have my father give you anything you like if you'll go now with your friend. I'll see he does not pursue you."

"That fellow can't give me anything," he cried, with a furious oath. "I'll do the giving when we meet—a bullet through the heart. Get up and shove along to yore room for the clothes—unless you want to go as you are."

Chapter Twenty-Two

Norris Takes to the Hills

KANSAS backed out of the house and bow-legged his way to the stable. He took the same ropes he had used for the other horses and went to the corral. No expert, it took him several minutes to catch two ponies.

Hate of Norris seethed in him. He made up his mind, as soon as he was out of this jam, to cut loose from the Tail Holt bunch and go back to Texas. From now on Norris would ride him if he stayed here.

Kansas led the roped horses back to the stable and saddled. His gaze swept the road along which Chiswick's men must approach the ranch. If it came to a showdown he could jump a bronc and light out, leaving Norris to play his hand alone.

He heard a sound of something moving at the hitch rack on the other side of the stable. It might be a horse stirring—or it might not. Stealthily he moved through the stable to the door and looked out. His revolver was in the open, ready for action.

What he saw surprised him. The girl Nelly was pulling the slip knot that tied one of the animals to the rack. Kansas moved toward her.

"Where you going?" he demanded.

Nelly gave a little cry of fear. "I—I—please let me go, mister," she wailed.

His furtive glance swept to the house. No sign of Morg, who was probably busy inside with getting the food ready.

Kansas stepped closer. Instinctively he lowered his voice, though he knew nobody could hear him.

"Girl, I'll let you go," he said. "Fork that bronc and light out. Keep going till you reach Chiswick and his posse. Tell Lee Kansas helped you get away. Tell him I'll be with his daughter and Norris watching over her all the time. Morg's idea now is to hole up in the old Walsh cabin back of Crowfoot. Don't forget the name, girl—Kansas. I'll be doing all I can every minute for Miss Chiswick."

"I— I won't forget," she promised breathlessly.

"All right. Light a shuck and go like the heel flies were pesterin' you." He added, "I'll have to make a play at shooting at you."

Nelly pulled herself to the saddle and was off, gathering the horse to a gallop in a few jumps. Kansas fired in the air twice. He ran toward the house shouting at the man inside it.

Norris ran out to the porch, gun in hand.

"She's gone," Kansas screamed.

"Jumped one of the horses while I was coming back from the corral. I took a crack at her and missed."

The killer looked at the horse and rider diminishing in the distance. "Suits me fine," he said. "I didn't much want her along anyhow. But we'll have to get going *muy pronto*. Finish saddling and bring the horses to the house. We'll pack the grub on there."

He went back into the house and into the bedroom where he had left Ruth a few moments before.

Ruth was taking something from the drawer of a desk. She turned quickly, trying to hide it behind her back.

The outlaw still had the .45 in his hand. He grinned hatefully as he crossed the room to her. His left arm he extended, palm open.

"I'll take that gun, sweetheart, before you hurt yoreself with it," he told her.

Reluctantly she brought her hand out, slowly, the gun in it. Her fingers let go of it. The man dropped it in the drawer from which it had come.

He laughed, with malice. "I train my women better than that. This time I'll let it pass without the quirt."

"I only meant to defend myself with it," she said.

"I'll defend you from now on, sweet," he jeered. Then, curtly, he snapped at her, "You got what clothes you'll need?"

"Yes."

"Enough to keep you warm nights if we're on the dodge outside. That's all you can take."

Again she pleaded with him. "I don't know what all you've done, but if you'll only let us go I'll see you get off. It would be madness for you to take me. Don't you see that?"

"No more of that," he said harshly. "We're on our way."

He took her back to the porch. Kansas was bringing up three saddled horses. Ruth looked around. She had to fight down her terror to keep from getting panicky.

"Where is Nelly?" she asked.

"She isn't going on our picnic," Norris said.

"But—you said—" She swallowed, then tried again. "You haven't—you didn't—"

"The young lady lit out while we weren't looking," Kansas explained. He was busy packing the horses.

"While *you* weren't looking," Norris jeered. "Stand aside. I'll do that packing. You don't even know how to tie a rope."

After he had adjusted the loads Norris helped Ruth to the saddle. She did not offer any resistance. That would not do any good. In her heart a hope was stirring. Nelly would tell her father. Soon the pursuit would start. The L C outfit and its friends would comb the hills. With them would be riding Jeff Gray.

Kansas led the way and Norris brought up the rear. He did not intend to let this girl escape too.

"Don't make any mistake," he warned. "I'll plug you same as I would a man if you make a break. I'm that kind of a bird."

The riders circled the pasture and took the hill trail back of it. As they topped each rise, all three of them turned in the saddle and swept the valley below with their eyes. Presently the hills enclosed them.

Norris rode up beside the girl. "Don't you worry, sweetheart," he mocked. "They won't catch us. If they do I'll make them wish they hadn't. You're eloping with a man this time, not a saw-

dust dummy like Lou Howard. Everything will be jake."

Ruth shivered.

Chapter Twenty-Three

No Threats, No Promises

AS JEFF GRAY rode from one land wave to another, heading north by east, he had a conviction that he was losing a lot of time. If Norris and his companion were making for the L C ranch house they would get there long before he did. He was letting himself get tangled up in the hill country.

He swung due east, along a rock ledge that barred the way. His judgment was that he had been working too far north. Now he was going due east.

From the ledge a voice came: "Stop right where you're at, me lad, and throw up your hands."

Startled, Gray pulled up. His heart turned a somersault, but he looked up with an expressionless face.

"First off, drop that gun," the voice ordered.

The man whose face peered over the ledge was Pat Sorley. A wave of relief swept over the rider.

"Lucky I met you, Pat," he said coolly. "I'm lost. Get yore horse and take me to the ranch."

"You've got a gall, young fellow," Pat told him. "I said to drop that rifle."

"I reckon to use it soon if I get a break," Gray said, ignoring the command. "Listen, Pat. War has broke loose. Chiswick has just had a fight with a Tail Holt crowd who came to dry-gulch some Mexican smugglers. Morg Norris and another fellow are heading for the ranch to get another horse. Nobody is at the house except Miss Ruth and Nelly. Don't talk. Get busy. We've got to ride there hell-for-leather."

"Are you lying to me, you scut?" demanded Sorley.

"No. I came from town to warn Chiswick and was with him during the fight. We caught them in Live Oak Canyon after they had ambushed the Mexicans."

Sorley had heard how Gray had saved young Chiswick. Swiftly he made up his mind.

"All right. I'll be with ye in a jiffy."

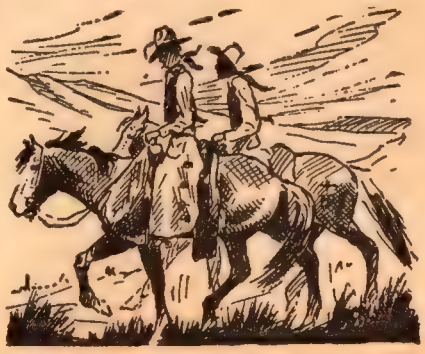
He joined the other a minute or two later. They rode knee to knee.

"Any of our men hurt in the fight—if there was one?" the line rider asked.

"I don't think so. Didn't wait to find out. I caught a horse belonging to one of the Tail Holt bunch and followed them as they ran. A man called Sid Hunt was killed. We captured Lou Howard."

"So it was some of Sherm Howard's dirty work," Sorley growled.

"Yes. I came up a side gulch after Morg Norris and another of them. They had only one horse and would have to



ride and tie till they got another. So I figured they would strike for the L C ranch house, knowing no men would be there."

"If that killer Norris hurts Miss Ruth, by God—"

"He might. That fellow is sure a bad *hombre*."

"Probably he has too much sense to annoy her, wouldn't ye say?"

"Most men would have, but I don't know about him."

They dropped down from the broken hill country toward the valley. Below them they could see a huddle of buildings at the L C home ranch house. At that distance it was too far to make out any signs of life.

"Likely those divils aren't heading this way at all, at all," Sorley said, "and we're worryin' ourselves for nothing."

"I hope so," Gray replied.

"And if they went to the ranch Miss Ruth might be out gallivantin' over the country the way she does," Pat went on, bolstering up his assurance.

Gray pulled up abruptly. "Listen," he said.

To them drifted the sound of a galloping horse. Instantly Gray lifted his pony to a canter and rode out of the draw in which they were. The approaching rider was a woman. He moved forward to meet her.

"They've got Ruth," she cried.

"Who?" asked Pat sharply.

"I don't know. Two men. I—I—got a horse and ran away." Nelly broke down and began to sob.

"Two men with one horse?" Gray inquired.

"Yes. They found horses in the corral, and they made us pack food."

"What d'you mean they've got Ruth?"

"They're taking her with them. I was to go too, but I got away like I said. One of the men let me go."

"Which one? Did you hear his name?"

"No. Yes, I did too. He said his name was Kansas, and that I was to tell Mr. Chiswick he would try to look after Ruth. He said he was against taking her and to remember that they would make first for the Walsh cabin back of Crowfoot. That is where they will hide."

"Did he call the other man Morg Norris?"

"He called him Morg."

"How did Kansas get a chance to let you go?"

"The other man had sent him out to rope and saddle horses and I slipped away to the stable. This Kansas pretended to shoot at me as I rode away."

Gray fired the next question at Sorley. "Where is this Walsh cabin?"

"'Way up in the hills. You follow Lance Creek—that's the one back of the house—pretty near to its headwaters. Then you cut across mighty rough country to Escondido Pass. The Walsh cabin is in a little park on the yon side of the pass. Nobody has lived there for a long time. Old Walsh was a hermit. I don't recollect exactly when it was he died."

"You'll have to go with me, I reckon, Sorley. I'd never find it alone. We'll stop at the ranch and pick up some grub." Gray turned to Nelly. "You're not afraid to ride alone to meet Chiswick, are you?"

She said no very dubiously.

"Nobody can harm you. Outside of these two fellows only one of the Tail Holt crowd is loose. Chiswick has him cut off from this end of the canyon."

"I thought there were five of them."

"One has been rubbed out, another is a prisoner," Gray said. "Keep right on to Live Oak Canyon. You'll meet some of the L C boys. Tell them what you have told us. Tell them Sorley and I are heading for the Walsh cabin."

Nelly said bravely, "All right. You —you won't let them hurt Ruth, will you?"

No muscle in the man's grim face changed, but the eyes that looked into hers had a cold, fierce deadliness. He made no threat in words, no promises.

"*Quien sabe?*" he murmured.

A moment later he was galloping toward the ranch.

They found the place deserted. Gray flung himself from the saddle, grounded the reins, and strode into the house.

On the kitchen table he found a note written on the margin of a torn piece of newspaper.

Dear Lee,

We had to borrow some grub for our honeymoon in the hills.—Your son-in-law, Morg Norris.

In imagination Gray could see the leering mockery on the killer's face as he scrawled the defiant challenge.

Hurriedly he and Sorley packed a supply of food. Each of them took a slicker and a blanket.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Two Go and One Stays

HOUR after hour Ruth and her captor wound deeper into the hills. Each added mile increased her worry. Not many people had penetrated the folds between these steep and rugged passes. Her friends would not know where to find her. They might as well look for the proverbial needle in the haystack.

In the saddle she sat clean-limbed and straight-backed, as impervious to fatigue as the outlaws, a slim figure beautifully poised. Morg Norris gloated over her young loveliness. She was proud, and she loathed and hated him. So much the better. He would bring down that lifted chin before he had finished with her! He wallowed in the sadistic pleasure of crushing a woman's self-respect.

He rode beside Ruth, insulting her with his jeers and even more with his admiration. She looked straight ahead, hot shame in her cheeks.

Upon her hand, lying for the moment on the pommel of the saddle, he let his fingers close. Ruth did not snatch her arm away. She moved it definitely, but without haste.

He grinned. "You don't like me, sweetheart."

"I come of decent people," she said.

"Wouldn't like me for a husband?"

"I'd rather be dead."

"Or a lover?"

She looked into his cruel gray eyes and a sickness ran through her body.

Her horse swung to the right to pass a clump of Spanish bayonet. When he rode beside her again knee to knee he took up the talk where he had dropped it, the odious smile still on his face.

"One or the other, dearie," he purred. "Take yore choice."

A stone lay heavy on her heart. "I'd advise you to be careful," she said, trying to keep her voice even and contemptuous.

"Me, Morg Norris, careful!" His laugh mocked her. "You'll learn about me before we're through. I never was careful in my life. I make my own laws."

His vanity was colossal. It came to her that perhaps she could play upon it to save herself. He liked to talk about his prowess. By flattery she might deflect him from the purpose playing in the shallow surface of his mind. She made a change of front.

"What are those laws?" she asked.

"I make 'em as I need them," he replied.

"But—they're not all shifting sand, are they?"

"I do what I want to do. I don't trust anybody. When I get in a tight I play my own hand and fight my way out of it."

"That last is good," she said reflectively. "A man ought to be self-reliant. At any rate you are that."

"Y'betcha. Nice for you to meet a real man instead of lah-de-dahs like Lou Howard," he boasted. "I aim to show you how a real guy makes love."

"Don't you believe in any moral law at all?" she asked, looking at him with critical interest.

"I quit Sunday School a right long time ago," he sneered. "Likely you'd say I was headed for hell."

She guessed he was proud of his reputation for evil.

"They say there is honor among thieves," she said. "You would stand by a friend, wouldn't you?"

"How do you know a friend?"

"I know mine," she answered.

"What about the sapheads you've flirted with off and on for the past two years? Would you call them friends, when you were making them think they were ace-high with you and they only stacked up as deuces?"

She shook her head, smiling at him faintly. "I have more sense now than I had then."

"Lemme see. How long is it since you ran off with Lou Howard and then jilted him?"

"I'm a reformed character," she told him lightly.

"Don't you get too reformed and we'll get along fine. Understand one thing. I know yore kind. You have to be treated like a bronc with hell in his neck. Soon as he finds out who is boss there's no more trouble. Until then I keep my quirt hot."

"Don't you think kindness might work better sometimes?" Ruth inquired, rather casually.

His crooked smile chilled her. "All these lads tried kindness with you. How far did they get? Some of 'em farther than others, I reckon." He waited to give her a chance to protest, but she did not do so. "Some need the whip. You can lash sense into them quicker than you can teach it any other way."

"That's a confession of failure," Ruth said. "I've noticed it often in horse breakers. The poorer ones, those not in the front rank, lose patience and get vicious with the colts; but top hands keep their heads and break the animals wisely. From what I've heard about you I'd think you were a top hand, one who would use his brains with horses—and women too."

Her words stung him. "I didn't say you had to keep quirting after they learn to answer their master's voice. I make 'em know who is in the saddle."

"Brute force is one way," Ruth agreed, a touch of contempt in her voice. "I suppose it's good enough for those who don't know a better one—How far are we going tonight?"

"We're going to the Walsh cabin," he said sulkily. "Maybe we'll keep going from there. Haven't made up my mind."

He resented her dismissal of him as a second-rater. There was an urge in him to prove to her that he could win her on her own terms. He had read in her manner some current of emotion not visible on the surface. Was it an invitation to prove how good a lover he was, a challenge which implied surrender if he could quicken desire in her? If he could persuade her to marry him he could wipe the slate clean and escape the consequences of abducting her.

They moved along the brow of a hill, dipped into a canyon, and climbed its rocky bed to a ledge from which they looked down into a small park not more than an eighth of a mile across from one lip to the opposite one. A log cabin stood about a stone's throw below them. Back of it was a mountain corral.

The horses picked a way down along a slope of rubble. In front of the cabin Norris drew up.

He called to Kansas, "We'll throw off here a while."

"What you mean a while?" Kansas asked. "Aren't we camping here tonight?"

"No," Norris snapped.

"Why not?" the other man persisted. "We're sure holed up mighty good here."

"Because I say so. That reason enough for you?"

"We're in this together, ain't we?" Kansas grumbled. "You act like I'm some dirty Mexican sheepherder."

"You trying to pick on me, fellow?" Norris demanded, his mouth an ugly slit.

"Nothing like that, Morg. Seemed to me this was a good place to roost. Nobody would find us in a thousand years. No, sir. What's the idea in moving on?"

"Kinda like this place, Kansas, don't you?" the other outlaw asked with silky suavity.

"Looks all right to me," Kansas said stubbornly. He added hastily, reading suspicion in the narrowed eyes of his companion, "But hell! I don't care where we camp."

"Maybe we could agree for you to stay here and for us to go on," suggested Norris significantly.

"What you mean, Morg? Course I'll go on if you do."

"You're so fond of me you'd hate to split up," Norris jeered.

"What's eatin' you, Morg?" asked Kansas unhappily. "I didn't aim to say a thing to annoy you." With the sleeve of his shirt he brushed away tiny beads of perspiration from his forehead.

Norris watched the wretched man. And Ruth watched first one and then the other. There was something here she did not understand, an accusation and a confession. A cold fierce glitter was shining in the eyes of Norris.

She did not know he was reconstructing in his mind that scene when he had come out of the L C ranch house to see Nelly flying down the road; figuring out what there was about it that had seemed forced and unreal. But to look at Kansas was enough to tell her the man was afraid to the marrow. His face had gone gray, his lips ashen.

"No, you wouldn't annoy me, Kansas," said Norris, low and soft. "You'd be for me every way from the ace, wouldn't you?"

"Yes," Kansas pleaded, his voice parched and dry. "I sure would, Morg."

"You wouldn't want me to stay here where nobody could find us in a thousand years, would you?" grinned the killer.

"Not if you didn't want to stay."

"Good old Kansas, faithful as Old Dog Tray."

"You—you got me wrong, Morg," burst out Kansas.

"Maybe so." Norris continued to smile. "Well, I'm going to the spring to fix up this scratch on my arm while you unsaddle and picket."

Ruth offered timidly to dress and tie up the wound. When he refused her offer she was glad.

Norris sauntered to the spring, contriving not to turn his back upon the other man. He carried his rifle with him.

As soon as he was out of hearing Kansas spoke to the girl. "Don't look this way," he said hurriedly, uncinching the horse she had been riding. "Act like I ain't even talkin' to you. Keep a-lookin' at Morg. He aims to kill me, because he figures I sent word to yore paw we would camp here. I did too, by that girl I helped get away."

"You helped Nelly get away?" Ruth said breathlessly. "You sent word to father we would be here?"

"Yep. Lemme do the talkin'. Keep him here long as you can. I'm going back to hurry up yore friends."

Ruth wanted to beg him not to leave her alone with Norris. But his next words stopped her.

"Morg must be headin' for Wild Horse Basin," the man went on. "I'll have Lee comb that country thorough. I got to light out now. Morg is fixin' to kill me." His eyes darted toward the spring. "I'll be sayin' *adios*, Miss."

Without touching the stirrup he flung himself into the saddle and lifted the horse to a gallop. Not an expert rider, one of his feet failed to find its stirrup. He clung to the horn to steady himself, his fingers dragging on one of the reins. The pony swerved sharply and the man lost his seat. A shoulder plowed into the ground when he struck. Almost instantly he was on his feet.

The eyes in his chalk face were glazed with fear. He started for the horse Norris had been riding.

Before he had taken two steps a rifle cracked. The body of the running man plunged forward as if it had been flung from a catapult. He lay motionless.

Ruth caught at the saddle horn of the horse beside her. For a moment everything went hazy. . . . She saw Norris moving forward, the rifle in his hands. He padded toward the prone figure, his face demoniac.

"You—you've killed him," Ruth cried, covering her eyes.

He laughed triumphantly. "Surest thing you know. He was aiming to run out on me, to sell me for a peace offering to Chiswick. Thought he could hand one like that to Morg Norris, the dern fool. I figured he would try for a getaway, and I sure had his number right. The guy doesn't live who can fool me."

Callously he pushed the body over with his toe to make sure his victim was lifeless. "Dead as a stuck shote," he pronounced cheerfully. "When yore uncle Morg cuts loose they don't even squeal."

The girl looked down at the huddled body which had been quick with life only a moment since, and a sick tremor ran through her. She felt panic rising to her throat—had to shut her mouth tight to keep from screaming.

"The lunkhead ought to of known better," he continued. "He was certainly committing suicide when he set out to throw me down. Better men than he ever was have found they had

bit off more than they could chew when they tackled Morg Norris. There ain't any man alive can throw a gun quicker than me. My record is seven, counting him."

His boasting was horrible to hear. There was something inhuman about it.

The killer began to laugh. "I told him we might agree for him to stay here and for us to go on. It will be that way. I'll saddle yore bronc and we'll be off."

As Ruth watched him re-saddle, she pulled herself out of the hopeless conviction that she was lost. It would never do to give up. She held her quirt tight in both hands, twisting it, while her thoughts darted here and there. If she could leave a message—

The man's back was toward her as he cinched her mount. She slipped the quirt from her wrist and wrote on the ground with the heavy end of it.

Wild Horse

Abruptly she stopped, flicking the whip idly. He was bringing the horse to her.

"Hold this while I get Ginger." He gave her a mocking word of warning. "And see you don't try to make a getaway like he did."

The instant he turned to walk to his own straying horse Ruth's quirt was busy. She added the word *Basin* to the message and signed with the initial *R.*

"All aboard the Honeymoon Express," he called, grinning at her.

She played for time. "Are we going to—to leave him like that?"

"Y'betcha!" He added, indifferently, "Fellows of his kind don't count with me. I like men with guts and women with jingle."

He moved toward Ruth, to help her mount. Hurriedly she pulled herself to the saddle.

Norris led the way to the rim of the park. Ruth followed, as a squaw might have done a victorious brave. What else could she do?

Chapter Twenty-Five

Sherm Howard Gets a Shock

ON THE door of Sherm Howard's house someone was knocking impatiently. The big man playing solitaire at the table put down the ten of diamonds and made sure his .44 was loose in the scabbard. He hoisted himself out of the arm chair and waddled to the door.

"Who's there?" he asked.

"Me. Mile High. Lemme in, Sherm."

Howard shoved back the bolt and threw open the door. The tall, shambling puncher pushed his way in.

"Gimme a drink," he said hoarsely.

His host closed and bolted the door, walked to a closet, and brought out a bottle and a glass. Mile High poured half a tumblerful, drank it in two gulps, and sat down.

"Hell to pay," he said.

"What's wrong?" asked Howard.

"Lee Chiswick bushwhacked us."

"When? Where?"

"In Live Oak Canyon, right after we held up the smugglers."

"Spill it."

Mile High told all he knew, which was not much. They had trapped the Mexicans and taken the pack mule with the silver when an attack had burst upon them. He had recognized Lee Chiswick and one of his sons. He thought Brand was one of them, but he could not be sure. Taken by complete

surprise, the Tail Holt men had not been able to put up a good fight. Sid Hunt had been shot down. Mile High had caught a horse and worked back through the hills to town.

"You don't know whether the other boys got away," Howard said. "Didn't see any of them down? Didn't notice Lou?"

"No, sir. I saw two fellows on one horse, but I lost track of them later. They didn't show up at the other end of the canyon. It sure was every man for himself."

"It seems to have been Mile High for himself," Howard said bitterly.

The lank puncher helped himself to another drink. "Ride me if you've a mind to, Sherm," he said morosely. "I was there. You wasn't. I'm tellin' you that it was hotter'n hell with the lid on."

Howard drummed with the tips of his pudgy fingers on the table. "Someone else ought to be in soon with news," he said. "Some of the boys must have got away."

"I reckon, but I wouldn't bet none on it."

"How did Lee find out what the boys meant to do?" Howard demanded. "Did you tell anyone, Mile High?"

"Not a soul. I don't believe any of the boys did. Kansas made a crack down at the corral about us going to Live Oak Canyon. I heard Sid blowing him out about it."

"Do you know who heard him?"

"No, I don't."

"Go down and ask Jim Reynolds to come see me."

Mile High uncoiled his long legs and rose. As he turned toward the door there came another knock.

"Who's there?" snapped Howard.

"Dan Brand," a voice answered.

"Anyone with you?"

"No."

Howard told Mile High to open the door.

When Brand walked in he faced two men with drawn revolvers. The foreman said tranquilly, "Put 'em up, boys. I didn't come a-smokin'."

Howard pushed the weapon back into its holster. Mile High hesitated.

"Maybe so," the lank puncher said. "But I can listen just as well with my gun out."

Brand said definitely, "I'll not talk to a man with his gun out; that is, not unless it's fightin' talk, with mine out too."

"Put up your hogleg, Mile High," Howard told his companion. "Don't you see that Dan is here on a peaceable mission?"

After the gun had disappeared Brand made a correction. "Peaceable or not, Sherm, depending on how you take it. I'll give it to you short and sweet. What I'm here to say is that Lee aims to hang yore son Lou to a live oak unless you get Miss Ruth back to the L C *muy pronto*, without a hair of her head injured."

The fat man stared blankly at the foreman. "Good God, man, what d'you mean? If you are talkin' about the Chiswick girl I haven't seen her since that day you-all were in town together."

"I didn't suppose they had brought her to town. The scoundrels who took her are holed up in the hills somewhere."

"What has Lou got to do with it?" Howard asked.

"He's one of the gang that did this. We caught him. He's our prisoner now. A hostage, you might say. If anything happens to Miss Ruth it's all off with him."

"What d'you mean he's one of the gang that did this? Lou doesn't go around carrying girls up into the hills, if that's what happened, though so far I can't make head or tail of it." Howard looked reproachfully at the L C man. "You hadn't ought to talk that wild lawless way, Dan. Be reasonable. First off, tell us the story. Begin at the beginning. Will you have a drink?"

"I will not," Brand said curtly. "No need to begin at the first of it, Sherm. You know that better than I do. You found out some Mexican smugglers were going to run silver through Live Oak Canyon to Tough Nut. You sent five of yore gang out to waylay them."

"Wa-ait a minute, Dan." Howard raised a fat hand to stop him. "No such a thing. Some of the boys headed for Tough Nut to see the elephant. They may have gone by way of Live Oak Canyon."

"It isn't more than forty miles off the direct route to Tough Nut," Brand said contemptuously. "Don't try to load me, Sherm. We found two Mexicans they had rubbed out and the pack mule with the silver. Yore crowd was still shootin' when we took a hand."

"The Mexicans must have attacked them," Howard protested. "That would be the way of it."

"Sure. When a brush rabbit gets nerve enough to spit in the eye of a rattlesnake. Like I said, Lou is our prisoner. He wilted right off and blabbled all he knew. Don't waste my time trying to lie. Here's the nub of it. Two of yore men slipped away from us up a side canyon. They cut across to the L C ranch house and picked up Miss Ruth. After she had rustled grub for them they took her with them into the hills."

"What two men?"

"Morg Norris and Kansas."

"I'm not responsible for what that killer Morg Norris does," the fat man burst out.

"Lee holds you responsible. So do the rest of us. You can't get away with that, Sherm. Every decent man in this county will be against you in this thing. If that devil Norris hurts Miss Ruth you'll be in one hell of a jam. Don't think anything else for a minute."

The big moon face of Howard was pallid. The reverse at Live Oak was bad enough. Not much chance to play innocent with Lou a prisoner. But this crazy adventure of Morgan Norris was ruinous. Sherm did not know which way to turn. Lee Chiswick hated him anyhow. If this girl was injured Lee would go hog-wild. His revenge would never stop at Norris—not even at Lou Howard.

"How do you know the girl didn't just go for a ride with some of the boys, Dan?" suggested Howard. "You know how she is, kinda—wild—"

The foreman's figure stiffened, his face set. "You'll drop that kind of talk, Sherm."

"I wasn't going to say a thing against her, Dan, except that she is young and likes the boys. No harm in that." Howard gestured with his soft plump hands, urging his point anxiously. "We want to be reasonable, Dan. I wouldn't have had this happen for all the money in the world—if it has happened. I can't believe it. Morg is a good-looking fellow. Maybe he just persuaded her to ride along a ways. If it was Morg. We want to be sure of that."

"Morg left a note," Brand said quietly. "Besides, the girl who works at the ranch got away and told us. What's the sense in trying to fool yoreself?

I'm here to tell you to get busy. Send some of yore scalawags out to shoot down Norris. Get Miss Ruth back somehow safely. If you don't, you're out of luck, Sherm."

Howard mopped his perspiring face with a bandanna. He made up his mind to sacrifice Norris.

"All this wouldn't have happened if Lee hadn't jumped the boys in the canyon and shot them up," Howard said virtuously. "These smugglers are criminals, desperate men ready for any deviltry. Sid Hunt was a deputy sheriff. Likely he figured it was his duty to arrest the Mexicans. If Morg has gone loco and taken Miss Chiswick into the hills—"

"No if about it," interrupted Brand brusquely. "I tell you he has."

"Then every man in our crowd will hunt him down as if he was a wolf," Howard turned to Mile High for support. "Am I right?"

Mile High nodded sulkily. "Soon as we know the facts," he demurred. "I've slept under the same tarp as Morg and I'm not camping on his trail with a gun just on Mr. Dan Brand's say-so." He looked at the foreman in hardy defiance.

Brand met him eye to eye. "Don't get on the prod with me. You're up to the neck in that holdup and for all I know you're in the kidnaping too."

"Who says I'm in either one or the other?" blustered Mile High.

"Lou Howard says you were in one," Brand retorted. "And I daresay some of our boys recognized you."

"When I was masked?" Mile High jeered.

"Who mentioned the bandits were masked?" the foreman demanded.

"Didn't you say so?" Mile High covered up. "Anyhow, any fool would know they'd wear masks."

Howard brushed this talk aside. "We'd better talk turkey. First thing is to get Miss Chiswick back. I can promise to put thirty men to combing the hills inside of two hours, Dan. I'll go the limit on this thing."

"Good, if you send them to the right place," Brand made blunt answer.

"I don't know where he is any more than you do," Howard cut back sharply. "And I won't have you saying I do, Dan. There's one thing more I'll say. My boy Lou isn't in this. If you—or Lee—or any of his riders—do that boy any harm I'll never quit till I've cleaned up the whole Chiswick nest."

"All I'm saying is that you'd better find Miss Ruth and get her home," Brand replied, frowning at him. "Damn quick, too." He strode out of the room.

Mile High said to Howard, angrily, "Is it yore idea to throw down on Morg?"

The lifeless eyes of Howard slid round to meet those of the other. "Don't always be a lunkhead, Mile High. What has this fellow done but throw down on you and me and all of us? When Morg Norris took this girl with him against her will he signed his death warrant. Don't you go signing yours. We're going after Morg to get him. You had better get you a horse and trail along with one of the posses. You'll find it's doggoned good insurance against a few years in the pen at Yuma."

"I didn't expect you to weaken before Lee Chiswick," the younger man said. "I'm sure ready to ride to bring the young lady back, but we don't have to put the curse on Morg. Why not let him slip through our fingers across the line?"

"Because we have to bump him off to

show good faith. He's gone too far. He'll be hunted down sure. To protect ourselves we have to be some of the hunters."

Chapter Twenty-Six

A Message in the Sand

JEFF GRAY had to fight down an impulse to hurry. It would be folly to wear out the horses getting to the Walsh cabin, only to find out that Kansas had sent them on a wild-goose chase. After all, the man was one of the gang. What more likely than that, under instruction of Norris, he had been trying to direct the pursuit in the wrong direction when he freed Nelly?

With a heavy heart Jeff admitted to himself that this was very likely a job that could not be done in a hurry. He might have to sleep on Norris's trail for a week. The fellow knew every pocket in these hills. If Kansas was false-carding they might not find the outlaws at all.

The two men traveled steadily, Sorley in the lead. The little Irishman held his horse to the fastest gait that would not sap its strength. They flung the miles behind them, moving always deeper and deeper into the hills.

"Much farther?" Gray asked.

"Not so far," Sorley answered. "That's Crowfoot over to the left. We're swinging round it now."

They circled back of the mountain, dropped into a gulch, and clambered up its stony bed. Near the top of the canyon Sorley stopped his horse.

"The cabin is in a little park just over the ridge. What do we do?"

"Better have a look first from the ridge," Gray suggested.

They left their horses just below the lip of the park, climbed up to the ledge, and looked down. No smoke rose from the house. There were no horses in the corral, but one saddled bronco was grazing near the spring.

"They sure have been here," Sorley said. "But they've done gone, and in some hurry, looks like. Didn't even take time to unsaddle. Why for did they leave one of the horses here?"

Gray was looking down at something sprawled out in front of the cabin. "They didn't need but two horses," he said, his voice harsh and cold. "One of them stayed here." He pointed at the still body.

A pulse of excitement hammered in the scrawny throat of the line rider. "Begorry, you're right. There has been a fight, and one of them got killed."

The young man said, "I'm going down."

"Look out for a trap," the old-timer advised.

"Don't think it's that. Two of the horses have gone."

But Gray did not take any unnecessary chances. His rifle was across the saddle as he rode down into the park. He made sure nobody was in the house before he took a close look at the dead man.

"Kansas." Sorley looked at his companion and then looked away. Both of them were thinking of what this meant to Ruth. "They can't be far ahead of us, if we knew which way they had gone."

Sorley began to quarter over the park looking for signs.

"He shot Kansas in the back of the head, from off to one side," Gray mentioned.

"The horses headed up toward that patch of little pines near the ridge," Sorley called to him. "Two of them. Morg was in a sweat to get away."

"Yes." Gray's voice raised in sudden excitement. "Come here, Pat. Someone left a message for us."

Sorley ran to him. He pointed to some writing scratched in the sand. The old man read it aloud slowly: "*Wild Horse Basin.*"

"It's meant for us," Gray said. "Either the girl wrote it—or Norris did. It's signed with her initial, but that doesn't mean a thing. The scoundrel may have left it to fool us. The letters are done kinda shaky, as if she had made them in a hurry, on the sly."

"That's right," agreed the line rider. "Norris would have fixed the letters deeper, so we wouldn't miss seeing them. I'd say Miss Ruth wrote it."

"Where is Wild Horse Basin?" Gray asked.

Sorley pointed to the north. "Up in the high hills, back thataway. Say, how would the girl know where he was heading for?"

"She might have heard him say—or Kansas may have told her before he was killed. Likely Kansas made some move to help her. Morg wouldn't have shot him if he hadn't figured the other fellow was turning against him. Let's get going."

"For Wild Horse Basin?"

"Yes. I have a hunch the girl did that writing. Morg never would have thought of it."

They carried the body into the cabin and covered it with two gunny sacks.

The riders followed the trail left by Norris and his prisoner. Once out of the park, Sorley waited only to make sure of the direction taken by those in front of them. He struck into the hills, dipping across gulches and winding round the shoulders of elephant humps.

The country grew wilder and more rugged. Sometimes they were in a region of stunted pines. More often the hills were dry and scarred with rock outcroppings. From the summits they could see a saw-toothed range lifting its crest into a sky of violet haze.

Jeff looked at the sky anxiously. In another hour it would be dark. A picture jumped to his mind and tortured him. He saw Ruth Chiswick sitting in the glow of a campfire, her eyes fear filled, panic rising to her throat. He saw Morg Norris watching her, the tide of desire sweeping him toward the climax that had been in his thoughts all day.

Long since they had lost the trail of the two they were seeking. Sorley was making straight as he could for Wild Horse Basin. His hope was to pick up again the tracks of the horses somewhere in that stretch of broken country.

The pursuers dropped down into the basin, came to a little stream tumbling down through the rocks. Sorley pulled up his horse.

"No use going any farther," he said. "Got to wait till we can see. All we'd do is get lost if we kept traveling."

Gray read the despondency in the old line rider's voice. What Pat said was true. They might as well throw off and make camp.

"There's one thing," he said. "If they came here Norris would camp on a creek. Maybe on this one, since it's the first he would come to in the Basin. You fix us up something to eat while I drift along the bank for a ways."

"Sure," Pat answered hopelessly. "Won't do any harm."

The younger man swung from the

saddle and turned his horse over to Sorley. "Reckon I'll make better time on foot," he decided.

He pushed through the brush for a half a mile or more. Abruptly he stopped. In front of him, two or three hundred yards distant, was a light which he knew must come from a campfire. A hot gladness poured through his blood.

Swiftly, with as little rustling as possible, he moved toward the camp. It was in an open place, close to the bank of the stream. On the edge of the clearing, as Jeff drew near, he made out the vague shadow of horses. Two figures were seated by the fire.

Gray crept forward with more care. There was no immediate hurry. Norris sat cross-legged at his ease.

He was talking. The slur of his mocking speech came to Jeff before the words.

"I sure picked a fine spot for our honeymoon, sweetheart," he jeered. "A million candles in yore bedroom, honey. I'd say you were in luck I picked you up. Some break for you to get me instead of that pink-ear Lou Howard."

The girl's head was low. Jeff could see she was sobbing. Her courage had washed out.

Norris rose, stretched himself, and yawned. The man's evil smile looked down on her. He opened his mouth to speak, but words were frozen on his lips. From out of the brush came a chill, crisp order.

"Keep yore arms right up where they are, Norris."

The figure of the outlaw grew rigid. A man was coming out of the scrub, revolver in hand.

"Don't make any mistake," Gray ordered. "Or it will be yore last." He moved toward the outlaw slowly.

Fragments of thoughts raced chaotically through the brain of the bad man. He yielded to a desperate impulse and dived back of the fire, dragging at his gun.

Jeff fired—missed. A bullet zipped past his ear. He shot again, knocking the revolver from the hands of the bandit into the creek. Norris made a rush to recover the weapon, his arm fishing the water for it. As he pulled the Colt's out of the current, Gray was upon him. The barrel of Jeff's revolver crashed down on his head and knocked him over. He lay motionless, his .44 again in the brook.

The redheaded man made sure the outlaw did not have another gun on his person. To Ruth he gave crisp commands.

"Get the gun out of the creek, girl. And pick up that rifle over there. Then step behind me out of the way."

Ruth did as she was told, her face chalk-white.

Norris groaned and sat up, hands pressing against his bleeding head. "You aimin' to kill me?" he snarled defiantly.

"I'm going to drag you back with a rope round yore neck," Gray answered. "Lee Chiswick will hang you to a cottonwood."

Ruth moved close to the man who had rescued her. "Let him go," she begged in a low broken voice. "I—I can't stand any more."

Jeff did not look at her. His gaze held fast to the prisoner. "No chance," he said. "He's going back with us to yore father."

"I'm afraid of him," the girl pleaded. "He's—horrible. You don't know."

"I can guess. Don't worry about him." Jeff added grimly, "He'll be rubbed out plenty soon."

The slitted eyes of Norris watched them warily.

"Without a gun and without a horse he couldn't do us any harm," Ruth urged.

"You don't turn rattlesnakes loose because you're afraid of them," Gray told her coldly. "You—"

Norris dived for the brush, his lithe body moving fast as a streak of light. The gun in Gray's hand roared, and the bullet plowed into the ground. For Ruth had struck down his forearm and was clinging to it with both hands. He tried to free himself—flung the girl roughly away. The escaping man was in the willows. Jeff could see and hear the violent agitation of the young sprouts. He fired at the place twice, then plunged into the thicket after the bandit.

For a hundred yards he followed the fugitive. Abruptly he gave up the chase. He could no longer hear the rustling of foliage. Better get back to the camp. The fellow might hide, wait till he had passed, and slip back to the horses.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Ruth Is in the Doghouse

ANGER grew in Jeff Gray as he swished back to the camp through the willows. By golden luck, he had found this villain's camp and saved Ruth from disaster. For some fool woman's reason she had interfered to help him escape.

Pat Sorley burst out of the brush just as Jeff reached the camp. "I heard shots," he cried, then caught sight of Ruth and stopped abruptly, staring at her. "Glory be, he found you."

"Yes." Ruth bit her lip to keep down a sob.

Gray strode up to her. "What do you mean by knocking down my arm and hanging on to me?" he demanded, a cold contained rage in his voice.

She swallowed a lump in her throat. "I—couldn't help it," she said meekly.

"Couldn't help it! Don't be a fool."

"I couldn't have you kill him, after—what I saw him do this afternoon." She shuddered.

"I don't get this," Sorley said, looking from one to the other. "You never in the worl-ld kept Gray from killin' this divil when he had a chance, did you?"

"That's just what she did—grabbed my arm and hung on while he was making a break to get away," Jeff said bitterly. "It seems he had become her dear friend during the day."

"Don't say that," Ruth cried. "He's an awful man—inhuman. His face—when he killed the other man—was like that of a devil. If you hadn't come—"

"You hated him so much you couldn't bear to have him rubbed out," Gray said with a curl of the lip.

"I didn't want you or Father to kill him in cold blood while he was unarmed," she explained in a low voice. "I saw him do that today—shoot down a poor man trying to escape from him. Would I want my friends to be like him?"

"So you were thinking of us," Gray said, his drawl derisively insulting. "On our account you turned him loose to kill eight or ten more men. Nice the way you manage our business. I hope Lee Chiswick is as grateful to you as I am."

He turned his back on the girl and spoke to Sorley. "Reckon we'd better

get back to our own camp, Pat, eat supper, and move down the creek a ways. He might meet some more wolves and come back to howl at us. I'll walk to camp. Better saddle those broncs and ride down."

Without another word to Ruth he picked up the weapons of Norris and departed.

"Why in heck did you interfere?" Pat asked Ruth severely. "Don't you know this Morg Norris is a black scoundrel all the way through and needs killing?"

"Yes, I know that," Ruth assented. "But I didn't want to see him killed by my friends. First, Mr. Gray said he would drag him back for father to hang. You know how impulsive father is and yet how rock-bound he is in his principles. He would have hanged this ruffian right off and been sorry for the rest of his life that he hadn't waited to give him a trial."

"All right. Then what would be the matter, gir-rl, with his having been killed while trying to escape?"

She sighed wearily. "Oh, Pat— I can't explain. I saw a man murdered this afternoon. Isn't one enough in a day?"

The Irishman patted her shoulder by way of comfort. "Your troubles are over now, my dear. You can forget this black scut. He will never worry you again. We'll stop his clock for him *pronto*."

Pat presently had the coffee boiling and the ham fried. Ruth sat near Pat, at a little distance from Gray, whose face still showed no friendliness. Her shoulders sagged. This was a man's world, and the emotions of a woman had no place in it. Gray had saved her life at the risk of his own. Instead of being able to show the gratitude she felt, she was in the doghouse, coldly condemned for not minding her own business.

While they ate their food and drank their coffee the line rider did the talking for all three. Eagerly he asked questions, and got only monosyllabic answers.

"Begorry, you'd think this was a wake and not the luckiest hour of the year," he snorted. "We ought to be thanking God you're safe again."

"I am," Ruth answered wearily.

"Ye don't look like it," he retorted.

"I'm—tired out," she said in a lifeless voice.

Sorley felt remorse at his sharpness. "You'll have a good sleep tonight and be rested tomorrow," he said gently.

Gray continued to eat and drink with a manner of hard indifference. He was feeling a reaction. Ever since he had known Ruth was the prisoner of Norris he had been tortured by the fear of what the ruffian would do to her. His concern had been intensely personal.

They packed, saddled, and rode down the creek for a few miles. Sorley chose for a camp ground a little mesa three or four hundred yards from the stream. No fire was lit, and the night was cold. Pat made a bed of pine boughs for Ruth and tucked her up snugly in two blankets.

"One of us will be on guard all night," he explained to her. "Don't worry about a thing, but let go of yoresilf and slip off to slape like a good gir-rl."

But Ruth did not find it easy to go to sleep. Her mind was still full of the excitements and the terrors of the day. Jeff Gray had the first watch. She could see him moving to and fro to keep warm. No other man had ever so impressed himself upon her as this one.

Never would she forget him as he strode into their camp up the creek an hour or two ago.

An intense masculinity was emitted from his person. It rippled through his smooth hard muscles. It rode in his bearing. It leaped from his cold gray eyes. There were times when the shock of it passed through Ruth's body in a wave that left her weak. No matter how long she lived or whom she met no other man would ever affect her so. Of that she was profoundly sure.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

A Friendly Call

SHERM HOWARD was alone in the house. He had spent the evening at the Golden Nugget and had come home to sleep, but he knew that was not going to be possible for many hours yet. He sat at a table, a small coal-oil lamp at one corner of it, looking down savagely at the solitaire layout in front of him.

He was in a jam and knew it. Fifty times he had gone over the facts anxiously looking for an outlet, and he had not been able to find one.

Morg Norris was the chief uncertain quantity. What the man would do Sherm could only guess. He was the dynamite that might blow them all off the map. If the miscreant injured Ruth Chiswick the big man knew he was through as boss of the Tail Holt wild gang. In the clean-up that would follow he would be lucky to sneak out of the country and escape the penitentiary. But if the girl was rescued unhurt—especially if she was saved by one of the posses Sherm had sent out to hunt Norris down—his position would be much less dangerous. There was still the Live Oak fiasco to explain, but he could probably get by on the story he had told Dan Brand.

Someone of course had carried to Lee Chiswick information of the impending holdup at Live Oak Canyon. Sherm was almost sure Jeff Gray was the man. From Reynolds he knew that Gray had been present when Kansas blabbed the destination of the party, and the red-headed man had at once disappeared from town and been absent ever since. As soon as convenient the fellow must be rubbed out. Howard had another urgent reason for this. Information had come to him about Gray that greatly disturbed him.

Howard came to an impasse in the game, gathered up the cards, and shuffled them. He started to deal, but stopped with a card poised. The outside door of the house had opened a few inches. Through the crack a pair of eyes gleamed. Very little more of the face could be seen, for the hat was well pulled down and a bandanna handkerchief covered the nose and mouth.

Sherm Howard had time for a moment of fervent regret. How had he happened to forget to bolt the door, with his .44 lying in the cupboard a long five yards away from him?

The door opened farther and a lithe body slid through the widened crack into the room. The eyes of the self-invited guest did not lift from his host while a brown hand closed the door and pushed home the bolt.

Howard's stomach sagged as if from a weight of ice-cold lead. His mouth went dry. The man standing with his back to the door was Morgan Norris.

Norris grinned evilly. "Didn't expect me, did you, Sherm? Figured some of

yore boys had dry-gulched me up in the hills?"

The fat man pulled himself together. "What you doing here, Morg?" he asked. "Don't you know this whole county is out lookin' for you?"

"Including all Sherm Howard's willing lads. Sure I know it." The desperado limped forward. "But I drapped in to thank you for sicking the boys on me."

The man was in bad physical condition. A bloodstained handkerchief was tied around his head. Another served as a bandage for his arm. He looked travel-worn and haggard. His cheeks were sunken, his eyes hollow. He was a sick man, worn down to the edge of ragged nerves.

"What's all this crazy talk about me sicking the boys on you?" Howard asked. "You ought to know better than that. Fact is, you've played the devil, Morg. I thought you had more sense than to pull the dumb thing you did. This country won't stand for doing harm to women."

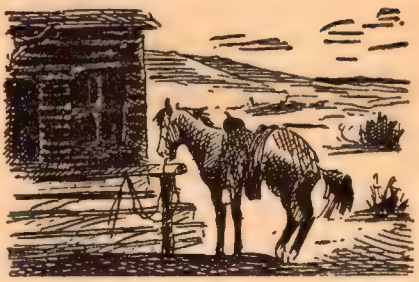
"Don't preach at me," Norris snarled out of the corner of his mouth. "Get me food and water to wash my wounds. But first off, I want a drink."

The heart of the big man lifted. "Sure," he said. "Surest thing you know."

He heaved himself out of the chair and waddled across to the cupboard. Beside the bottle lay the .44 he had unwarily separated himself from when he reached the house. This he pushed down between his trouser belt and shirt. The bottle and a glass he brought back to the man at the table.

Norris poured a large drink into a tumbler. He held it in his hand and slid a menacing look at his host.

"I saw you get that gun," he said, lifting his upper lip in a jeer. "Fixin' to gun me if you get a chance, you damned double crosser! Well, you don't get it." Norris raised the glass. "Here's to a short life and a smoky end for traitors, Sherm."



Coldly Howard defended himself. "Your information is not straight, Morg. Where did you hear I had turned against you?"

"I heard it from a ledge back of Coal Creek," Norris told him harshly. "Yore boys were camped just below. I heard 'em talk. Didn't know who they were at first. I found out you'd sent them out to get me, by crikes."

"Why don't you use your bean to think with, Morg? Of course I sent them after you. After you had gone crazy I had to make a bluff, didn't I? I had to make out we were all hunting you to save our own bacon. Talk about me throwing down on you. What have you done but throw down on every last one of us?"

"What do you mean throw down on you?" the fugitive asked sulkily.

"You know what I mean, Morg. When you took that girl with you to the hills you set this whole district ablaze against us."

"Lou ran off with her first," Norris said.

"With her own consent. That's different. Where is the girl, Morg? What did

you do with her?"

"I didn't do a thing," Norris growled. "Are you aiming to fix me up some food? Or ain't you?"

"Don't push on the reins, Morg. I asked you a question."

Norris gave information, very reluctantly, for what he had to tell hurt his inordinate vanity. "I turned her over to that double-crossing son of a gun who calls himself Jeff Gray," he said.

The opaque eyes of the big man rested on him. "Tell it to me, Morg," he ordered.

"I'll tell it while you make me some supper," Norris told him. "Haven't seen grub for nearly two days."

The young desperado helped himself to a second drink, then sat down and pulled off his boots. He was careful not to turn his back to Howard. Sherm began to knock together some food, always with his eye on the other.

Norris told the story of what had occurred, edited in such a way as to protect his self-conceit. Three men had attacked him at his camp in Wild Horse Basin and he had fought them until the revolver was shot from his hand. He had made his getaway on foot.

"You didn't walk all the way from Wild Horse," Howard said, after he had broken a fourth egg into a frying pan.

"Most of the way." The outlaw looked down at his swollen feet. High-heeled cowboy boots are not made for walking, and he had been tortured cruelly during the long hours of tramping. "I roped a bronc at Walker's in the night and found a saddle in the stable. Most of the day I lay holed up in the rocks."

"If they shot yore gun from yore hand I reckon you're not armed," Sherm said, very casually.

The killer watched him through slitted lids. "Don't you bank on that, Sherm," he drawled.

Howard said lightly, "I was thinking I'd have to fix you up with a gun if you had lost yore own."

"I'm armed, all right," the bandit sneered. "Don't make any mistake about that. But I may take you up on yore offer. Maybe I can use two guns."

Norris ate ravenously. He drank cup after cup of coffee. More than once he went back to the bottle. At last he pushed his chair back.

"I reckon you know it was Lee Chiswick's crowd attacked us in Live Oak Canyon," he said. "I left in some hurry. Me and Kansas. Did they collect the rest of the boys?"

"Mile High got away, but Sid Hunt was killed. Lou they captured."

"Too bad about that, Sherm," the other man jeered. "He'll blab and you'll be in this up to yore neck."

The big man looked at him bleakly, but made no answer in words. "Kansas got away with you, didn't he?" was his comment.

A film of wary blankness came over the eyes of the hunted man.

"Kansas made it out of the canyon with me," he said slowly. "A posse jumped us at the old Walsh place and got Kansas. I fought 'em off and lit out with the girl."

"Got Kansas? You mean killed him?"

"He'll never be any deader."

"Come clean, Morg. We've got to know just where we're at. Did you do this Chiswick girl any harm in any way?"

"Didn't hurt the li'l fool at all, outside of slapping her white face once when she got sassy."

"What are yore plans?" Howard inquired.

"First off, I aim to dress my wounds and bathe my feet in hot water."

"Sure, Morg," the fat man said with oily smoothness. "Help yoreself to anything I have here. You are welcome to whatever I've got."

Norris leered at him. "I'll bet you feel like I was your prodigal son. A fatted calf wouldn't be near good enough for me."

"You can have it straight, Morg, since you ask for it," his host retorted brusquely. "You've played yore hand like a damn' fool. I was hoping you wouldn't show up here but would slip across the line to Mexico. Well, you're here. There's nothing I can do but give you a lift on yore way. Right now all the passes will be watched. Question is, where do you aim to hole up? They will watch Tail Holt the way a cat does a mouse hole. Even now someone may know you're here."

"Only Sherm Howard, and of course he wouldn't give me away," Norris said derisively.

"Sure nobody saw you come in?"

"Sure. While I think of it, Sherm, I'll take that other gun you promised me." The slitted eyes stabbed into those of the older man.

For a barely perceptible instant Howard hesitated. He had a suspicion Morg was not armed. If so, he could be killed now with no risk. The man had become a menace. It would be well to get rid of him. He could use the credit that would come to him for rubbing out the desperado. But he found he had not the sheer nerve to draw and pump lead, not with the killer's gaze on him and his hand close to where the butt of a revolver might lie inside his vest. It was too big a chance to take.

"Glad to give it to you," Howard said in his cheerful voice of false heartiness. "You'll find it in the tray of the trunk there. It's a good gun too. Throws just a mite high, but you'll make allowance for that."

"You get it for me, Sherm," the visitor urged. "You know just where it is."

Howard got the gun. He handed it to Norris, who broke it and made sure the chambers were loaded.

"Much obliged, Sherm," the outlaw said, mockery in his voice. "I can sure use this. Haven't had a gun in my hand since those skunks jumped me at Wild Horse."

The fat man made the best of it he could. He said promptly, "I'm not dumb, Morg. Knew all the time you didn't have a cutter. Trouble with you is you're so damned suspicious. Why wouldn't I let you have a gun when you're up against it?"

"You'd bust a trace to help me, wouldn't you, Sherm?" the killer jeered.

"Personally, far as I'm concerned, you can go to hell yore own way, Morg," Howard told him bluntly. "But I stand by my crowd, and you're one of the gang, even if you do wear out our patience. You can't stay here of course. Everybody in town comes and goes to this house, as you know. Where do you aim to hole up till you can slip across the border?"

"I won't worry you about that," Norris said with a cynical grin.

"I don't care where you hide," the older man replied. "Nothing to me. Point is, when they crowd me, I'd like to make sure I'm giving them the wrong steer."

"Sure. You'd hate to see them collect me. But don't worry about it. They won't." The outlaw got a basin, poured hot water into it from the kettle, and reduced this to the proper temperature. All the time he watched his host out of the corner of his eyes. "But there's

one thing you can do for me, Sherm, since you're so anxious to help. I'm about out of mazuma. I'll take a small loan if you can spare it."

"Haven't got much here, Morg, but what I have is yours," the big man said. "Ten dollars—or even twenty—"

"Wouldn't be of any use to me," Norris said coolly. "I'll take five hundred."

"Five hundred." Howard stared at him. "You're loading me, Morg. You know I haven't got anything like that in the house."

"You'd better have it. Don't try to fool me, Sherm. I know you."

The narrow eyes were glittering dangerously. Howard knew he must either pay or fight. From a coffeepot in the cupboard he drew out a roll of bills. He counted five hundred and pushed the money across the table. There was about fifty dollars left.

With his evil grin Norris mentioned that it was more blessed to give than to receive. "Pay you when Jay Gould sends me a million," he added cheerfully.

He busied himself doctoring his wounds and taking care of his feet. Before he left he gave Howard instructions, a purring threat in his voice.

"You haven't seen me, Sherm. You don't know where I am. It wouldn't be healthy for you to get busy rustling a posse to take after me. Understand?"

Coldly Howard answered. "No use trying to help you, Morg. You don't know how to appreciate kind treatment."

"If I got any from you I'd sure keep my eyes skinned till I found out why," the man on the dodge cut back.

He backed to the door and slipped out.

Howard was busy thinking, and his thoughts all pointed to one conclusion. Norris was too dangerous a man to let live.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Morg Meets Clint Doke

MORGAN NORRIS closed the door of the Howard house and ran through the garden to a back street. Before moving into the open road he glanced up and down it to make sure nobody was in sight. Swiftly he went up the road until he came to a path crossing a vacant space. Behind the plot were two or three adobe houses belonging to Mexicans. He wound around these and came to the rear door of the Golden Nugget.

He did not enter the gambling-house, but crept along one of the walls until he could look through a window and see what was going on inside. Sick and weary as he was, nothing would have pleased him more than to drop in there and relax.

But he dared not show his face. The Golden Nugget was closed to him forever. If he were to open the door and walk in now a dozen cold hostile faces would stare at him, and at the right moment bullets would crash into his body as they had in that of Wild Jim Pender.

He crept along the wall toward Main Street. From this spot he had fired the shot that had wounded Lee Chiswick only a few weeks ago.

A poor broomtail stolen in the hills had brought him to town, but he intended to leave on a better mount. There were sure to be horses in front of the Golden Nugget.

A half-dozen of them stood at the

hitch rack. His eyes went up and down the street. Two or three people lounged in front of saloons, one or two others moved briskly toward some destination.

Norris stepped to the hitch rack to choose a mount. To him there came the sound of hoofs. Three men rode round a corner and drew up at the Golden Nugget. One of them was Curly Connor.

Back of a horse Norris crouched, revolver in hand. He guessed that these men had just come back from a fruitless search in the hills for him. They swung stiffly from their saddles as riders do who have not left them for many miles.

"Me, I could use a drink," one of them said wearily.

The speaker was Mile High. He tied the rein with a slip knot and turned toward the Golden Nugget. He looked into the glittering eyes of someone standing back of a horse.

"Goddlemighty, it's Morg," he broke out.

"Right, first guess," Norris said evenly, not raising his voice. "Don't monkey with yore hardware, any of you, unless you want to go out in smoke."

Mile High said bitterly, "You killed Kansas, you double-crossing devil."

"So I did," the bad man jeered. "And I'm still on the shoot, Mile High. Roll right along and get that drink, with yore arms down."

Stepping swiftly to the left for a better view of the man, Curly dragged out his revolver. Two guns blazed, one of them that of Connor.

With a yell of triumph Norris vaulted to the saddle. Mile High's .45 came into action, but the horse was plunging at the feel of the spur. Again Norris fired, his mount still in the air. An instant later he was dashing into the darkness, crouched low in the seat.

"Rout the boys out of the Golden Nugget, Jim," Curly said excitedly. "Get after him immediate. He got me."

"Bad, Curly?" asked Mile High.

"In the shoulder. I'll make the riffle all right, but I don't reckon I can ride with you."

The lank puncher picked his hat out of the dust. There were two little holes in the crown. "The son of a gun sure gave me a hair cut. Been one inch lower he would of collected me. Better get inside and have the boys look after you, Curly."

"Yes," agreed the black-bearded man. "I'll be all right when I'm fixed up. Get fresh horses, Mile High."

The fugitive had already left the road and turned up a gulch trail leading into the hills. As soon as possible he must get out of the country. Until that time he must lay hidden.

Old Man Haskins would take care of him—for a price. That was one of the reasons he had been forced to hold up Sherm Howard.

Norris rode steadily till late at night. The cabin of the nester was dark when he rode up to it, but a hound dog filled the night with its barking. A man came to the door. He opened it only an inch or two.

"Who is it?" a piping voice demanded.

"Lemme in, Pete. It's Morg Norris."

The hillman hesitated. "I ain't exactly fixed for visitors, Morg. That's a fact sure enough." He lowered his squeaky tones to a whisper. "I ain't alone. I done got someone here."

"Who you got here?" Norris asked.

"Why, I don't rightly know his name," Haskins said. "A fellow from Texas."

Morg swung from the saddle and walked close to the other. "I'm listenin', Pete," he said, and his voice dripped menace. "Is this some guy sent up to get me?"

Haskins was a big ill-kempt slovenly man. He was of middle age, large, with a deep barrel chest from which one would have expected the roar of a bull.

"Jumpin' Jehosophat, no!" The high falsetto registered excitement. "Don't start lookin' for trouble, Morg. This is a bird sent up by Sherm Howard. He's on the dodge."

Norris showed his teeth in an evil grin. "Not a guy about thirty, with a crooked nose and a scar on the back of his left hand, medium weight and height, calling himself Jeff Gray maybe."

"Nothing like that. A big raw-boned fellow with a scar in his cheek made by a bullet."

"Not redheaded?" Norris was still suspicious.

"Iron-gray."

"Who does he claim he is?"

"Maybe he didn't give me his real name. Seems he left sudden with his horse's belly draggin'. He had trouble."

Someone inside the cabin joined the talk. "Who is it, Pete?"

"A friend, Clint. Wants to stay with me a spell. He got into a kinda jam. Name is Norris."

"The fellow they're after?"

"Yes."

"What's all the powwow about? Why don't you bring him in?"

"Go in and light a lamp, Pete," ordered Norris in a low voice. "Put it close to yore friend. Then I'll come in."

Haskins lit a lamp and set it on a table. The light shone on a man sitting up in bed. His hair was tousled, his face unshaven. He held his right hand beneath the blanket. The scarred cheek, in conjunction with the shifty ratlike eyes, gave him a sinister appearance.

Norris came into the room. His gaze locked with that of the stranger.

"Who are you?" he demanded in a snarl.

"He's visiting me not you, Morg," mentioned Haskins mildly.

"Keep outa this, Pete," advised the Tail Holt bandit out of the corner of his mouth. "I'm asking a question, and I aim to get an answer."

"My turn to ask one now," the man in the bed said, a hard rasp in his voice. "Who do you think you are to talk thataway to me?"

"I'm Morgan Norris. Come clean, fellow. I'm in a tight and I don't aim to throw in with anyone I don't know. These hills are full of guys that are poison to me."

"Morg is all right, Clint," Haskins put in. "Might as well tell him who you are."

"My name is Doke—Clint Doke."

Norris stared at the man. "How many Clint Dokes are there?" he asked. "Another bird has been claimin' that name around here."

"So Howard tells me," the hairy man nodded. "He's a damn' liar. Jeff Gray is his name. He's a United States marshal."

Morg Norris stared at the man in the bed. His mind was struggling to adjust itself to the implications of this information.

"He showed us a poster with his picture on it offering a reward for his arrest," Norris said. "Beneath the picture was the name Clint Doke. It was sure enough the spittin' image of this Jeff Gray."

"I wouldn't know about that," an-

swered the man who claimed to be Doke. "I'll describe Gray to you. Red-headed—crooked nose—scar on the back of his hand—medium size."

"That's the fellow," Norris said with a bitter oath. "So he's a spy. I knew he was wrong all the time, but Sherm wouldn't listen to me."

"Gray is dangerous. Don't make any mistake about that."

"But how come he to have that poster? What's the idea in his claiming to be you—if you are Doke?"

The hairy man scratched his tousled head to help him to think. "Search me. Onless he figured you-all would have heard of me account of the Texas and Southern holdup and he was using my name for a stand-in."

"That's the way I figure it," Haskins said. "Easy enough for him to get a poster printed with his picture on it claiming to be Clint here. Clint is a Wyoming man. Not likely he would be known up in this neck of the woods."

"Kinda funny at that," Norris insisted grudgingly. "He comes up here, then you come. You aren't hunting U.S. marshals, are you? And Gray—what is he doing here?"

"I came because Texas was getting too hot for me," Doke explained. "Too many rangers on my tail. So I drifted this way and fixed it with Howard to let me hole up while I'm on the dodge."

"Is it yore idea that Gray came up here lookin' for you?"

Doke shook his head. "I'll be dadgummed if I know. But he's got me scared. That fellow sleeps on the trail till he gets his man."

Norris drew a bottle from his hip pocket and passed it round. All three of them took a pull at it.

"My feet hurt like all get out, Pete," the most recently arrived fugitive said, embellishing his resentment of the fact with an oath. "I was afoot for twenty miles. How about lookin' after my bronc for me?"

Haskins departed to take care of the animal. Norris sank into a chair and drew off his boots.

"So you're scared of this son-of-a-gun Gray," he jeered.

"Surest thing you know," admitted the train robber. "Scared he'll drag me back to Texas where old man trouble is sittin' waiting for me."

"He's no bigger than you are behind a gun, is he?"

"Not a mite. I'd as lief stand up and swap bullets with him if it came to a showdown. But seems like he always drags in the guy he starts after."

"He went after *me*, but he didn't get me," Norris boasted.

"Story I've heard is that he set you afoot without a gun," Doke told him maliciously.

The younger man ripped out another angry oath. "He had luck. Came outa the bushes at me and whanged away before I had a chance. Me, I'm tired of being hunted. I aim to turn hunter. This Gray is poison to you, the same as he is to me. What say we throw in together and collect him—hang his hide up to dry?"

Doke slanted a side look at him and grinned. "They ought to call you Sudden Morg. Five minutes ago you hadn't made up yore mind whether to cut loose at me with yore hogleg or not. Now you're talking up a partnership. I'd have to sleep on it first. We don't hardly know each other."

"Sudden Morgue is good," Norris said, and broke into jangled laughter. "I'm in this part of the country for only a short visit longer, but before I leave I aim to meet Mr. Jeff Gray and stop

his clock."

"We'll talk about this again," the man from Texas said. "If we can find out where this fellow is roosting and if he hasn't got too many friends around him I might take chips in yore game."

Haskins came into the cabin and they dropped the subject for the time.

Chapter Thirty

Lou Howard Talks

TO THE surprise of Ruth her father did not blame her for having assisted Morgan Norris to escape. He was so happy at the fortunate termination of her adventure that there was no room in him for criticism. Apologetically he defended what she had done, explaining the reason for it to Gray.

"Ruth was so nervous and worked up she didn't know what she was doing. You saved her. That's the main point. Someone else will kill the miscreant even though you didn't."

Gray shrugged his shoulders.

"When I was captain of rangers more than once I was forced to kill men who were better dead," Chiswick said. "Ruth doesn't understand that this is in the day's work for an officer, that he doesn't rub out the scoundrel personally. You and I know it is the law wipes him out."

"So I'm an officer, am I?" Gray countered.

"Must be. Of course you're under sealed orders and can't talk. Probably you're gathering information. Well, when you've got it count on me if you need help."

"Much obliged. I may take you up on that. I'm going to drift to town today, but before I go I want to talk with young Howard if you don't mind."

"I'll have the boys bring him in to you." Chiswick rose from the chair where he had been sitting. "About that going to town? You mean Tail Holt?"

"Yes."

"Don't you reckon that would be a little foolhardy? Sherm Howard must have a pretty good idea you are responsible for his boys falling down at Live Oak."

Gray smiled. "Some might say it was foolhardy for you to have gone out into the brush to collect the Brayton gang about ten years ago."

The former captain of rangers dropped the point. He had taken his life in his hands to run down this bunch of outlaws. They had killed his oldest son, a boy of nineteen, a fine lad who had enlisted in the rangers a month or two before.

"I didn't do so good a job," he said. "I missed one, the brains of the outfit. He escaped."

"I didn't know that," Gray replied. "Left the country, I reckon."

"Yes. Left Texas and came here."

"Here?"

"Unless I've been fooling myself for years. I'd never met Buck Brayton, so there's a chance I'm wrong."

"Sherm Howard," Gray guessed.

"Yes. Hope you have better luck and don't let him slip away."

"I'll put my cards on the table, Chiswick. No reason why I shouldn't tell you now. I'm a special deputy United States marshal sent to get evidence against the outlaws operating around Tail Holt. I'm pretty nearly ready for the gather. When I am I'll need you."

The face of the cattleman lit. "Best

news I've heard in a long time. The L C men will be with you to the finish."

"Good. Now if I can have a powwow with this scalawag."

Frank Chiswick presently came into the room, bringing with him the prisoner Lou Howard. That young man was dejected, sullen, and alarmed.

Gray continued to lounge in his chair. He looked at Howard out of chill accusing eyes.

"You've sure got yore tail in a crack," he said at last.

"They got no right to hold me here," Lou burst out, his voice shrill with fear and anger. "I haven't done a thing—not a thing. Anything I've said because they were third degree-ing me don't go."

"Suits me if it does you," the crook-nosed man said coldly. "I'm a special United States marshal. If you want to go to prison for ten or fifteen years, in the event you aren't hung, that's all right with me. Today you can write yore own ticket, but you can't do that tomorrow. As soon as someone else turns state's evidence you lose yore chance."

"How do I know you'd play straight with me if I talked?" the weakling asked sullenly.

"You don't. All you know is that you're in a bad jam with no other way out. Maybe I'd double-cross you. Maybe I wouldn't. Figure that out for yoreself."

"You're asking me to round on my friends," Howard whined. "I can't do it. You know I can't."

"I'm not asking anything," Gray answered. "I'm telling you where you get off. Either you'll swing or you'll go to the pen. Someone in yore gang will go free. It will be the one that talks."

The matter-of-fact manner of the officer left young Howard no room for doubt. He was in a trap. The old man had sent them to disaster. Sid Hunt and Kansas were dead. Morg Norris was a fugitive. Lou himself was a prisoner, and in one hell of a hole. This Gray had been snooping around. He might have dug up evidence enough to blow up the whole works. Under his breath Lou cursed weakly. A wave of panic swept through him, but he made a feeble effort to stem it.

"Thought you claimed to be Clint Doke," he said, and rolled a cigarette with fingers that trembled. "Curly and Morg saw a poster with yore picture on it."

"I wanted them to think I was Clint Doke and they obliged me," Gray said. He rose from the chair where he sat. "Take him back to the doghouse, Frank. He has had his chance. I'm hitting the trail."

Howard wilted visibly. "Wait a minute," he said hoarsely. "What—what is it you want to know?"

"How did Sherm Howard know the Mexicans were coming up through Live Oak Canyon with silver?" the United States marshal demanded abruptly.

"One of the smugglers gets him information, a Mexican called Juan Pasqual," the prisoner said, shakily and reluctantly.

"Who were in the gang that held up the Mexicans last spring?"

Lou shook his head. "I don't know," he pleaded. "They didn't tell me about that. I never was in anything of this kind before. I wish to God they had left me out this time."

"Who held up the Benson stage? Either talk turkey or shut up. Don't lie to me. You know who did it. You've heard plenty of conversation about it."

"You're asking me to send my friends

to the gallows," Lou cried, his voice shrill and high.

"Do as you please. I'll tell you one thing. Morg Norris wouldn't lift a hand for you if it didn't suit him. He killed his own partner, the man called Kansas, while they were escaping."

Howard stared at the officer. "Morg killed Kansas? You're loadin' me. Why would he do that?"

The officer nodded at Frank. "Tell him how it was. Maybe he'll believe you."

"Morg killed him at the Walsh cabin because Kansas wouldn't stand for his ill-treating my sister."

Lou Howard looked at him, and knew he told the truth. Norris was a ruthless killer. The young man remembered the day and night of agony he had endured while waiting to find out whether Ruth was safe. The riders of the L C had told him that if any harm came to the girl they would string him to a cottonwood. Norris had brought that on him. Why protect the man from the consequences of the Benston stage holdup?

"The story is that Morg Norris and Mile High did it. All I know is from gossip."

"That's not all you know. When did Morg and Mile High leave town? How long before the holdup?"

"The evening before," Howard replied sulkily. "But that don't prove—"

"On what horses?" Gray interrupted curtly.

"Mile High was riding his buckskin and Morg a sorrel with white stockings."

"How d'you know?"

"I saw them when they came back to town."

"Which was when?"

"The day after the holdup."

"Sit down at the table and write a list of all those in the Howard gang. I want all of those connected with it in any way."

Howard took the offered pencil with palpable unwillingness. "I don't know what you mean," he protested. "There's no 'Howard gang.' "

"Get busy," snapped the officer. "I don't want argument or explanation."

Lou sat down, twiddled the pencil, and began to write names. *Sid Hunt, Mile High, Kansas, Curly Connor, Morg Norris, Yorky, Slim Burke, Pete Haskins, Curt Dubbs, Jim Reynolds.*

"That all?" asked Gray.

Another name was scribbled, then still another. "That's all I know," the writer said.

"Add yore's and Sherm Howard's."

"I tell you I wasn't in on whatever was doing."

Gray picked up the list. "I'll have a check on everything you tell me, so you'd better not dish up any lies. We'll take the names in turn. You'll tell me all you know against them."

"I'll just be guessing," Howard said doggedly.

"See you guess right."

The marshal put him through an exhaustive quiz. As Gray had already suspected, Curly and one or two others were rustlers but not bandits. Reynolds was not really one of the gang, but he assisted them with horses. Young Howard contradicted himself frequently, twisted this way and that, made futile explanations of his lies. But before his inquisitor had finished with him the facts were clear.

Gray nodded to Frank. "'S all," he said.

The officer stood before the table absorbed in thought. A light hurried step sounded in the passage. Gray looked up, to see Ruth at his elbow.

"You're not going to Tail Holt—alone," she broke out.

He frowned at her, slowly dragging back his thoughts to meet the interruption. "Yes. Why not?"

"Father told me so. You can't do that. Don't you see you can't? Sherm Howard knows it was you who told Father about the Live Oak expedition. He must know, since he's not a fool. You won't last there an hour."

"Sherm Howard isn't God," he said. "He hasn't power over life and death."

"He has, in Tail Holt. You know that as well as I do." Words tumbled from her pale lips. "When men get in his way he blots them out. It's not only what you've done, though that would be enough. He must be afraid of what you're going to do. So he'll play safe—and order his killers to shoot you."

He said, smiling at her, "I've been an officer on the frontier for five years, and nobody has killed me yet."

She pushed that from her, the palm of her hand held upright. "Please," she begged. "If you've got to go to town let some of our riders be with you."

Jeff Gray felt the enchantment of this girl grow on him. Fear for his life had foamed up in her like the surf on a beach. She was tacitly admitting her deep concern for his safety. She was a lovely young thing quick with life, and his whole being reached out to her.

His hard face showed nothing of what he was thinking. Sternly he told himself not to be a fool about this girl. His business was with men, not women.

"Sherm Howard may be a bad man," he told her quietly. "But I'm leaving a hostage here at the ranch. He can't hurt me if he thinks yore father would retaliate on his son."

"I don't know anything about that," she cried wildly. "Maybe some of his men would shoot you without waiting to ask him. Can't you see how dangerous it is?"

"Most things aren't dangerous if you walk straight up to them," he explained. "It's when you run away from them they get you."

"You haven't any right to throw your life away. Haven't you a mother—or sisters?"

"No. I'm a lone wolf."

"There must be a woman somewhere who—cares."

He flung away discretion and caught her in his arms. "I wonder about that," he said, and looked into her deep, lustrous eyes.

He kissed her lips, pushed her away abruptly, and strode out of the room.

Chapter Thirty-One

Jeff Visits the Sick

NOW why did I do that?" Gray asked himself reproachfully as he rode to town. "I go to acting like a kid because she is pretty as a painted wagon and is made to be loved. I don't aim to get married. So there won't be any more nonsense from you, Jeff Gray."

As he drew nearer Tail Holt he brought his attention back strictly to the business of the hour. It was growing dark, but there was still too much light for his purpose. He drew aside

from the road and guided his horse through the mesquite and the prickly pear until he came to a more open space where Spanish bayonets were scattered. Here he rested until stars began to prick through the sky roof.

He remounted, but did not return to the road. Winding in and out among the brush, he came to a barbed wire fence and followed it to a gate. Through this he passed into a large pasture. At the far side of this he stopped and looked down upon the lights of the town. He unsaddled, then picketed the horse.

His approach to the village brought him to the rear of Ma Presnall's boarding-house. For several minutes he watched the house. There were lights in two of the bedroom windows upstairs. One of these might or might not be the one he wanted.

He slipped through the back door into a hall. From the kitchen he heard the clatter of dishes. Jeff took the narrow stairway to the second story. On the landing he waited a moment, listening for sounds to guide him. Two of the rooms had someone in them probably, since it was not usual to leave without blowing out the lamp.

Out of one of the rooms a man walked. There was no light in the hall. The man walked toward the front stairs. Jeff called a question after him.

"Say, which is Curly's room?"

The lodger stopped. "The one on yore right," he said.

"Obliged," Gray told him, and watched the other go downstairs.

Again the officer listened. There was no murmur of voices inside the room indicated. He opened the door, walked in, and pushed the bolt home.

Curly was in bed reading by the light of a lamp beside him. He looked up. His eyes gleamed.

"Mr. Jeff Gray made a short visit to Tail Holt Tuesday," he said in the singsong voice of an uneducated man reading from a newspaper. "The boys gave him a warm welcome. The obsequies will be at Boot Hill this afternoon."

"Which one of the boys are you interring?"

"I wouldn't know who else beside you," Curly answered. "You're a cool customer, Jeff. Don't you know this town is mighty unhealthy for you?"

"It doesn't seem to have been healthy for you either, Curly. How's yore wound getting along?"

"Fine and dandy. Morg was in some hurry when he handed me this pill and didn't plant it where he wanted."

"He sent one to my address too a few days earlier, but I wasn't where he mailed it."

"How came you to let the rattlesnake get away when you had him under yore heel?" Curly asked.

Gray told him the circumstances. The wounded man meditated over the strange ways of women.

"He didn't harm her any, did he?"

"No." Gray asked a question. "Know where Norris is, Curly?"

The black-haired man shook his head. "If I knew I'd tell you. Maybe he's clear outa the country. While he was in town he held up Sherm Howard and took five hundred dollars from him."

"That distresses me," Jeff said dryly.

Curly grinned. "I thought it might."

"Sherm done any talking about me?" Gray asked casually.

The man in the bed looked at him. "You're sure a cool cuss. Yes, he's talked considerable, and that's all I aim to tell you—except that Tail Holt is a good place for you to be an absentee from." The face of Curly had taken on a stiff

harshness. "I'm no sidekick of yours, fellow. I'll throw in with you or anyone else to stamp out that villain Morg Norris. Then I'm through. I've got no information for you—or any other spy."

"Whose spy am I?"

"Damfino—or care. Maybe you're a government man. Point is, I don't throw down my friends."

"Nice friends you have, Curly. Ready to ambush and murder poor Mexicans who don't have a chance."

Connor flushed. "I'm not asking you to approve of them."

"No, and you don't approve of them yoreself."

"Got me all figured out, haven't you?"

"My guess is that you're a rustler," the cool man went on. "I don't think you'd stick up a stage or a train."

"A kind of a Sunday school bad man," the blackheaded man jeered. "Too good for hell and not good enough for heaven."

"Something like that," Gray smiled.

"Anyway, you get no information out of me, even if I had any. You came here to us with a lie, claiming to be Clint Doke. That washes you up with me."

"How do you know I'm not Clint Doke?" the officer queried.

"Because Clint Doke—" Abruptly Connor broke off.

"If you know I'm not Doke you must have heard so from somebody who knows either Doke or me."

"Figure it out any way you please."

"It wouldn't be Doke himself, would it?" the crook-nosed man insinuated.

"I've never met up with Doke," Curly said hastily.

"You wouldn't have much chance, lying up here," Gray suggested. "But I expect friends drop in now and then. Maybe they mentioned Doke had come to town."

"You're 'way off yore base," Curly retorted. "Doke isn't anywheres around here. One of the boys wrote a letter to a friend in Texas for a description of this train robber and you don't begin to fill the bill."

"You and the bird who wrote ought to start a detective agency, Curly," mentioned Gray with cool irony.

"No, sir!" exploded Curly. "We've got too many detectives around here already. All I've got to say is that you'd better light a shuck *pronto*."

"Don't get excited, Curly. I didn't come here to get you."

"There's nothing you can get me for," Curly answered hardily. "What you came to see me for was to get me to throw down my friends. Nothing doing. I'll tell you another thing. Some of the boys usually drop in during the evening. Better not let them find you here."

"That's good medicine," Gray said, and reached for his hat. "Only you're wrong about why I came. I thought there was a chance you might tell me where Morgan Norris is hiding, if he hasn't slipped across the border yet."

Footsteps sounded in the hall. Someone tried the door handle and found the door bolted.

Chapter Thirty-Two

Not Looking for Trouble

CURLY drew a long blue-nosed revolver from beneath his pillow. He looked at Gray. The narrowed eyes of the detective were like half scabbarded steel.

"Don't start anything," Curly warned, a rasp to his low command.

"Better tell yore friends that," Gray said, almost in a murmur, his gaze fixed on the door.

A fist thumped on a panel. "Do we get in—or don't we?" a cheerful voice demanded.

"Who's with you, Mile High?" Curly asked.

"Sherm Howard. Let us in, fellow, and give us a knockdown to her."

"Might as well let them in," Gray said quietly.

"All right, but don't you go reaching for yore gun. I'll be watching you every minute."

Gray trod softly to the door and drew back the bolt, then stepped across to a far corner.

"Come in," Curly said.

Howard waddled in, Mile High at his heels. They stared blankly at Gray. The fingers of Mile High's right hand closed spasmodically, but his arm did not move toward the weapon at his side.

"Keep yore shirts on, boys," Curly snapped. "I don't aim for you to have any Fourth of July in here." One of his hands was under the sheet.

The opaque eyes of Howard shifted to the man in the bed. "What does this mean, Curly? You throwing in with this spy?"

"No, Sherm. He says he drapped in to ask me where is Morg. And don't make any more cracks like that."

"Don't get on the prod, Curly," answered Howard crustily. "When I find you locked in a room with this fellow who is here trying to make us trouble I'm entitled to ask questions."

"Sure, but ask 'em gentle, Sherm."

The lank cowpuncher flung out abrupt inquiries. "When did this bird come to town, Curly? What's he doing here? He tipped off Lee Chiswick about the Live Oak business, and he can't tell me anything different."

"Don't ask *me*, Mile High," Curly retorted. "He has a tongue in his head."

"I wouldn't try to tell you anything different, Mile High," Gray said, his voice ominously low.

Mile High's hand twitched. The distance from it to the butt of the gun at his thigh was a short foot.

"Admits it, by thunder," the man cried.

The sheet on the bed tilted up at an angle. "Don't make a mistake, Mile High," said Curly, a brittle snap to the command. "If there's trouble, I'm in on it."

"On the side of this spy?"

"On my own side. Bump him off soon as you've a mind to, but not in my room. I don't aim to have the government in my wool."

"Hadn't been for him Sid and Kansas would have been alive today," snarled Mile High.

"Why make me a piker?" Gray asked coolly. "Better charge the two Mexicans buried in Live Oak against me too."

"That's right," agreed Connor. "Blame yoreself and Sherm and Morg for that, Mile High. You rode out asking for trouble."

The blank eyes of Howard rested on the marshal. "Nothing to that, Curly. The boys were attacked by these smugglers while riding peaceably through the canyon. Lee Chiswick was right there to cut off the retreat of our friends. Looks to me like he was in with the greasers to fix up the ambush. This fellow Gray too. We don't know a thing about him even now. Come on, Mile High. We'll go where we are welcome. I'm disappointed in Curly."

His manner of reproachful resignation annoyed the wounded man. "Don't

pull that line, Sherm. You knew all along where I stood about these hold-ups. I stayed out of them, and I'm still doing that. You nor nobody else can pass the buck to me."

"There's no buck to pass, Curly, and if there was you ought to know me better than that," Howard said, shaking his head sadly, a picture of a good man misunderstood. "Let us go, Mile High."

"One moment, Howard," interposed the crook-nosed man. "Get this right. I'm here on a little visit, and yore son Lou is at the L C on one. Think that over carefully."

The gross man in the doorway had already thought it over. He did not need the implications pointed out. Gray had just done for Chiswick the greatest service one man could do another. If anything harmful occurred to Gray while he was at Tail Holt, the vengeance of the cattleman would probably fall upon young Howard.

The fat hand of Sherm Howard made a gesture repudiating any lawless intent. "I'm not lookin' for trouble," he said mildly.

After he vanished from sight Gray laughed mockingly. "Too bad to misjudge such a fine upstanding citizen."

Curly did not laugh. "Fellow, you're in a tight," he said acridly. "Don't let him fool you."

"He's not foolin' me a minute," the officer replied. "Mr. Howard means to blast me soon as it is safe."

"Hmp! He'll sit around and wait till then, you reckon."

"Not that old fox. He'll try to round me up and keep me corralled till he can strike."

"That would make sense," agreed Curly thoughtfully. "Fellow, you light out."

"Why give me good advice, since you're only playing yore own hand?" Gray asked derisively.

Curly frowned at him. "Hell, fellow, I never did like detectives. But you have sand in yore craw. I don't class you with a rattlesnake like Sherm Howard or a wolf like Morg Norris. Even if you don't play my game you'd do to take along." He waved a hand toward the open door. "I'll say *adios*."

Gray nodded farewell and walked out of the room. He tiptoed down the same back stairway up which he had come a short time earlier. Slipping round the house, he crossed the road to the cottonwood grove opposite. At the other side of the clump of trees was a path which angled back to a small adobe house built on the edge of a creek. Through a window he saw a man in his stockinged feet sitting at a table reading a newspaper. He was past fifty, a heavy-set, tough-looking customer.

The man outside circled the house and knocked on the front door.

"Evening, Hank," he said a moment later, smiling at the blacksmith. "Can I stay with you for a while?"

Ransom stared at him in surprise. "Lord love ye, man, where did you blow from?" the old soldier asked.

Gray walked in and closed the door. "I came from having a talk with Sherm Howard, Mile High, and Curly," he said.

"And they didn't shoot you into a rag doll? Man, don't you know Tail Holt is plain poison for you?"

"So Curly says. Sherm doesn't want any trouble, he claims."

"Don't you know Sherm Howard better than that? This very minute he is considering how best to kill you."

Gray thought it likely and said so. He told his friend what had occurred

in the bedroom of the wounded rustler.

"Curly is a decent enough chap," the old Indian fighter admitted. "A nice lad. I always liked him. But Howard's gang will be looking for you right now. Where did you leave your horse?"

"In Mack Willard's pasture."

"I'd better rope it and turn it loose outside, so they won't know you haven't left town."

Gray told him where he had left the saddle and Ransom left to recover the saddle and free the horse.

Chapter Thirty-Three

Morg Is Reinstated

LOU HOWARD lay on a bunk staring at the ceiling. He was sullen and despondent. Why was his father not doing something to get him out of this trouble?

His guard was Buck Conrad. To see the short, thick, bowlegged cowpuncher chewing tobacco cheerfully filled Lou with impotent rage.

Buck talked a good deal. Much of his conversation had to do with the fate of Lou and his friends.

"They say that down in Yuma summer time it's hotter'n hell with the lid on," Buck drawled. "It will be a sort of preparation for you-all for the future. Anyways, all yore friends will be there with you in the pen. That will be a comfort. Too bad about one thing. They say you're quite a ladies' man. You'll have to lay off the Don Juan stuff."

"I'm not going to the pen," Lou snapped.

A grin spread over the seamed face of Conrad. He was making preparations to turn in for the night.

"You sure got a nice, hopeful, sunny disposition," he said. "If I was you my tail would sure be draggin'." Buck examined the ropes that tied the prisoner to the bunk. "You all comfortable for the night?"

Lou grunted.

After examining the door to make sure it was bolted, Buck put out the lamp and rolled into a bunk. Howard heard creeks as the cowpuncher settled himself into a suitable position. Presently snores sounded, an irregular battery of them that usually lasted through the night.

The prisoner could not get to sleep. He was worried. The best he could hope for was a term in the penitentiary, unless his father could work out some slick scheme for getting him off. The only escape from this was to turn state's evidence. If he did this, his name would be a hissing byword. He would have to get out of the country.

A faint tapping on the window reached him. He sat up, as well as he could for his bonds, his stomach muscles tightening. A prickling of the skin ran over him.

A voice murmured, "That you, Lou?"

"Yes. Who is it?" he whispered.

"Morg Norris. Listen. Where does this Gray sleep?"

"He's gone to town. Get me out of here, Morg—please."

"All right. Wake up the guy there. Tell him Lee has been calling him. When he comes to the door we'll fix him."

"All right. I'll tell him."

Conrad wakened, at the sound of young Howard's urgent voice.

"What's eatin' you?" he asked sleepily.

"Someone has been calling you. Sounds like Chiswick."

Buck sat up and listened. Someone outside shouted his name. He went to the door, not waiting to light a lamp, and threw it open.

"Who wants me?" he asked.

They were his last words. Two guns roared. The cowpuncher caught at the jamb, and slid down, his knees buckling under him. Morg Norris ran forward and flung another bullet into the prone body.

"Get out your knife and cut me free," implored Howard.

The second man came into the room. With a jackknife he severed the rope that bound the prisoner. Lou Howard was surprised to note that the sinister face bent over him was unfamiliar.

"Anyone else with you?" Lou asked, rising from the bunk.

"No more. We came to get Gray. Lucky for him he's not here. Don't need an army, do we?" the killer wanted to know, and added, cruel laughter in his voice, "Wisht it had been the spy Gray we had croaked instead of this dumbskull here."

The three men passed swiftly out of the cabin. Already they could hear voices and the sound of men running. Someone came out on the porch of the big house and wanted to know who was there.

Norris was in the saddle. He galloped up to the porch and fired at the man standing there. Out of the foreman's cottage came Dan Brand, sketchily dressed. He blazed away at the young outlaw with a rifle. The bandit wheeled his horse and cantered back to his companions.

"Hit the grit, boys," he ordered. "Gonna be hot here if we stick around."

The stranger gave Lou a foot for a rest and Howard swung to his saddle behind him. As the horses pounded down the road, the roar of guns followed them. Howard looked back anxiously, his heart thumping with fear.

The fugitives headed for Tail Holt. They kept to the road. Pursuit would probably be useless, since the outlaws could turn into the brush whenever they heard the sound of riders back of them.

Morgan Norris was jubilant. He was bringing with him a welcome back to the gang, he hoped. For in rescuing Lou he had done what neither Sherm nor his had been able to do. It was a big piece of luck, of course, but it ought to lift the curse from him among his old allies. Who else would have dared to attack Chiswick at the home ranch, kill one of his riders, and snatch the prisoner away? That he had been trying to kill Gray and not to free young Howard did not matter.

Riding through the night, after an hour or two of travel, Norris lifted his voice in song.

The young killer had a fairly good, untrained tenor voice, but Howard had at the moment no interest in music.

"You singing for Lee Chiswick's riders, Morg?" he asked irritably.

"You haven't got any objections, have you, Lou?" demanded Norris.

"All is, I don't want to bring the L C outfit down on us," Lou explained.

"I'll bet you don't," jeered Morgan. "You're sure gun-shy, Miss Lou."

The lights were still blazing in the Golden Nugget when they drew up at the hitch rack. Norris walked into the gambling-house, the other two at his heels.

Mile High and some others were at the bar drinking. A man who started to lift his glass put it down instantly.

"Morg Norris!" he exclaimed.

The card game was suspended. The

wheel ceased to turn. All eyes turned upon the three who had just entered the place.

"Don't get on the prod, boys," warned Norris. "I'm here peaceable. I been out to the L C ranch for a li'l call on Lee Chiswick. I bumped off one of his warriors and brought back Lou Howard. I got to apologize for not getting that spy Gray. He wasn't there."

"Didn't I have something to do with all this?" sneered Clint Doke.

"Sure. You went along with me. But I thought of it. I ran the show." The killer swaggered to the bar. "I can explain any little thing you got against me, boys. First off, drinks for everybody on me. Morg Norris is back."

Mile High said, not lifting his eyes from Norris, "You got quite some explaining to do, fellow. Kansas?"

"He was aimin' to give me up to Chiswick's warriors. I had to get him before he got me. Same with Curly. He was firing at me when I wounded him. I could of killed him but I didn't."

"And I reckon you ran away with the young lady for a joke."

"No, sir. I made a mistake there, but I was taking her back home when Gray's posse bumped into me. She'll tell you I didn't hurt her any. Send for Sherm. We'll have a powwow and fix things up."

"You run hog-wild, then come back and say, 'Forget it, boys.' I got a better memory than that," Mile High flung back.

Morg slid an ugly look at him. "I went out to the L C with Doke here and rescued Lou, didn't I, while you lads were talking about what a helluva hole he was in?"

"That's what he did," young Howard said. "Someone go get Father. We got trouble enough on our hands without fussing among ourselves. Shove that bottle this way, Pete."

The tension relaxed. A Mexican boy was sent to bring Sherm Howard. To an admiring but not altogether friendly audience Norris narrated his adventures. They lost nothing in the telling.

Howard, senior, arrived ten minutes later. With him came a leather-faced man known as Yorky. The fat man looked at his son, then at Norris.

"So you're back," he said to the latter.

"Y'betcha! All set for the fatted calf, Sherm."

Howard ignored the attempted blitheness. "I'll listen to you, Morg," he said.

The killer swept a hand in the direction of the rescued man. "Lou, he'll do my talkin' for me," he boasted. "While you were sleeping comfortable me and Clint risked our hides to get yore boy for you. We had to bump off an L C rider and fight a battle with Chiswick's gang, but we brought Lou back with us."

"Fine. We would have had Lou anyhow in a day or two." The fathomless eyes of Howard rested in those of Norris. "Did you bring Kansas back with you too?"

Norris began to bristle. "Kansas was a double-crossing son of a gun."

"You told me the other day a posse killed him. That right?"

The killer hesitated. "A fellow has to go through," he said sulkily. "Kansas was fixing to throw me down. It was him or me. I had to beat him to it."

Pete, the bartender, threw in a low-voiced suggestion. "That's right, Sherm. The young lady says Kansas told her he meant to line up with her dad."

Impatiently Lou interrupted. "We got to work together, Father. All of us. And damn' quick. This Gray is a government marshal hot on our trail. He's loaded up with evidence and aims to bust Tail Holt wide open. He'll sure do it if he's not stopped."

The eyes of Mile High rested on young Howard. "Where did he get all this evidence, Lou?"

Angrily Lou turned on the gaunt cowpuncher. "Hasn't he been snooping around here for a month? He was there with information about the Live Oak business, wasn't he?"

"So he was. I wonder where he got it."

"Reynolds says he was there when Kansas made a slip at the corral," Sherm mentioned.

"And it's reasonable to figure that if he found that out he could pick up plenty more," Lou added, speaking to Mile High.

"He knows a-plenty," Norris cried. "That's why we went out to the L C to collect his scalp. He wasn't there. He'd lit out. Lucky for him he had. But I'll drag him out of his hole wherever he is."

"You going to stay in these parts, Morg?" Sherm asked mildly.

"You bet I am. Why not?"

"I was thinking if you're going to stick around here you won't need that five hundred you borrowed from me for your trip to Mexico."

Storm signals flared in the sultry eyes of Norris, but he knew the return of the money was the price of reinstatement.

"I've only got four hundred left," he said sulkily. "I gave old man Haskins the rest."

"I'll take the four hundred if you don't mind," Howard said blandly. "When I see Haskins I'll get the balance from him."

Reluctantly Norris surrendered the money.

"Like to have a little talk with Lou," that young man's father said. "Afterward I want to see you and Mile High, Morg."

Lou followed Sherm into the little room Curt Dubbs used as an office. The big man closed the door. He sat down ponderously in a chair.

"What you want to see me about?" his son asked nervously.

The older man spread plump white hands. His expressionless eyes were fixed on the other.

"Come clean, Lou," he ordered. "What does this Gray know? What did you tell him?"

Tiny beads of perspiration began to stand out on the forehead of the younger man. "You didn't do a thing for me," he protested. "Left me there to be hanged. If they hadn't got Ruth home safe that's what would have happened to me too."

"I was doing all I could for you, but never mind that. I've got to know where we stand. What did you tell Gray and Chiswick?"

"What I told under fear of death doesn't count," Lou evaded. "Maybe I said more'n I should. So would you have. So would anyone."

"I'm listening."

Lou told what he had confessed, bit by bit, his father sweating the story out of him.

After the son had finished, the older man sat staring in front of him, piecing together the things that he knew and those that he suspected. The questions Gray had put showed that he had plenty of information and was only seeking confirmation.

Sherm Howard knew he must act quickly. He had to destroy Gray before the marshal closed the net on him. Tomorrow might be too late.

"Tell Morg and Mile High I want to see them in here," he ordered. "You go home and go to bed. Don't tell anybody else what you've told me. If you do, someone is liable to fill you full of lead."

Howard waved the two outlaws to chairs when they entered the room.

"We've got to get busy, boys," he told them. "Lou is right. This fellow Gray is dangerous. While he was at the L C Lou picked up one or two bits of information. Gray knows a lot more than we think."

"Where did he learn it?" Mile High asked.

"Lou didn't tell him anything, if that's what you're hinting at, Mile High. But Gray asked a lot of questions. One of them was about the time you and Morg left town before the Benson stage holdup. Another was when you came back and on what horses. Lou said he knew the answers too."

"I always knew he was here for no good," growled Norris. "If I'd had my way I would have stopped him from ticking that time he came back with the game leg from the L C. But you wouldn't have it that way, Sherm."

Significantly, Howard said, "I wouldn't interfere with you now, Morg."

"Hmp! Do you expect me to comb the brush for him?"

The big man slumped in the chair and slid an oblique look at the killer. "If you're looking for him you can be accommodated, Morg. Gray is in town."

"In Tail Holt?" snapped Norris.

"Roosting right here."

"You mean was here," corrected Mile High. "Five or six hours ago. We bumped into him, Morg, in Curly's room."

"Bumped into him and didn't knock him off," jeered Norris. "You're a fine bunch of warriors."

"Lou was still at the L C," Mile High retorted angrily. "We dassent touch the fellow, for fear Chiswick would hang Lou's hide up to dry. Gray had the gall to tell us so."

"So you said, '*Adios, amigo,*' and walked out on him," the other young man snarled.

"Lou isn't at the L C any more," said Howard evenly. "Far as I'm concerned it's an open season on Mr. Jeff Gray. I'm an old man myself, and peaceable, but if you young bucks are snorting for battle I can give a guess where you'll find him."

"Where's he at?" asked Norris, a sharp edge to his voice.

"Unless I'm 'way off he's spending the night with his friend Hank Ransom."

"How'd you know?"

"I don't know for sure. I'm reasonably certain. Maybe a little bird told me." There was no reason for not telling that a Mexican had brought him word he had seen Ransom catch and saddle a horse in Willard's pasture, none except that he liked to convey an impression of omniscience.

"If we find Gray there, we'll rub out Ransom too," Morgan said callously.

"Maybe you could fix it to look as if they had killed each other," suggested the fat man.

Norris took that with raucous laughter. "You're sure one sly fox, Sherm. That's the way we'll fix it if we can. I'm on my way. You buying chips, Mile High?"

"Sure am," assented the lanky cow-

puncher. "This bird Gray is bad medicine for me."

"Better take along some lads you can trust," warned Howard. "He has the rep of a fighting fool."

Chapter Thirty-Four

Ruth Goes Night Riding

LEE CHISWICK looked down at the body lying on the cot. "Buck would have been alive now if I hadn't given him the job of guarding that scamp."

"He'd been alive if he had obeyed orders," Dan Brand said. "You got to look at this right, Lee. We told him not to open the door unless he was sure who was there. I reckon he was roused from sleep and didn't stop to use his head."

Ruth stood behind her father, her gaze fixed on the still figure of the cowpuncher. "Who did it?" she asked in a low voice.

"That devil Morg Norris," answered Lee, his face set and rigid. "I recognized him when he rode up to the porch to take a crack at me."

The girl shuddered. The thought stabbed her that she was responsible for the death of Buck Conrad.

"No use trying to follow him in the dark," her brother Frank said. "If we got close he'd take to the brush."

"They'll likely head for Tail Holt to get Lou Howard home," Brand guessed.

The eyes of Ruth grew wide with horror. Jeff Gray would not know until too late that the prisoner at the L C had escaped. He would carry on under the impression that he had a hostage in the camp of his friends.

She cried out her fear to her father.

For a moment he stared at her, letting her warning sink into his mind. "You're right, girl," he answered. "I don't know how he is playin' his hand, but we've got to let him know there's nothing to keep Sherm from him now."

"Letting him know won't be enough, if he is at Tail Holt and they have him trapped," she cried.

"No. We've got to sit in. I sure have gummed the works."

"Not you, but Buck." Brand spoke for all to hear. "Can't blame yoreself, Lee, because Buck played his hand bad. The poor fellow made a mistake, but he didn't live long enough to know it."

"Buck was a top hand every way. I couldn't have picked a better man to ride the river with." Chiswick spoke harshly, to conceal his emotion.

"Mr. Gray is a good man too," Ruth said gently. "If we hurry, perhaps—"

Lee gave curt orders. "Get the boys together, Dan. See they're armed. Frank, you and Tony run up mounts. We'll take off with what men we have. Round up the men at the line camps, Bob, and bring them to Tail Holt. This looks like war, and we may need all the help we can get."

Five minutes later Ruth walked into her father's office and found him examining guns and ammunition.

"What are you going to do with me and Nelly?" she asked.

He looked at her, startled at the problem posed. "By jinks, Ruth, I hadn't thought of that. Can't leave you here alone. Have to let Frank take you to Tough Nut, I reckon. It's a long ways. You'll be safe there."

"If we get there," Ruth conditioned.

"What you mean?"

"Do you know where these killers are? Maybe they're loose in the hills. Maybe we would meet them."

"Good God!" exclaimed Lee.

"There's only one thing to do with us," his daughter said. "Take us to Tail Holt and leave us at Ma Presnall's. We'll be safe there."

"No!" he exploded. "We're riding for a showdown, girl. There's liable to be a battle right on the main street."

"There won't be one at Ma Presnall's boarding-house, will there?"

"I don't want you around, anywheres near."

"Of course not, but we can't help it. Nobody would hurt a woman in town. It's only in the hills, with fiends like that Morgan Norris, Nelly and I would be in danger."

"That's so," he conceded. "If there was anything else to do." Lee looked at the lovely liability helplessly.

"There isn't any other way. You have to go help Mr. Gray. I'll be safe with you and not anywhere else. I'm going to stay near you this time."

Ruth did not mention that there was a more pressing urge upon her than her own safety to go to Tail Holt. There was a man there, in desperate danger, and in *his* safety her being lived and breathed. She felt it would be impossible to wait through dreadful dragging hours and even days to get the news of his fate.

"All right," Lee assented. "I'll take you with me—both of you. I wouldn't if I could help it, but there's nothing else to do, as you say. You and Nelly fix up your war bags. We may be there two-three days. While we're at Tail Holt you'll stay right in the house every minute. Understand?"

Ruth said she understood.

They took the road two hours after midnight.

Steadily they rode, though a lovely night of stars that softened the harsh and dessicated face of Arizona to a strange ghostly loveliness. Even the *sahuaros*, with their intimation of age-old decay, were like magnificent candelabra waiting to be lit. Peace reigned over the land.

But there was no peace in the heart of Ruth Chiswick. Pictures flashed before her in the darkness.... One man in a narrow street facing a dozen. The roar of guns. His strong, supple body lying slack in the dust.... A semi-circle of men in an arroyo, their bullets spitting toward one common center. A man back of a boulder, wounded to death, still sending defiance across the space between him and his enemies.

Passionately she longed to be beside him. She lifted troubled eyes to the quiet far sky and prayed. *Oh God, don't let him die.*

Chapter Thirty-Five

Laddie Barks

A LIGHT sleeper, Jeff Gray was awakened by the furious barking of the blacksmith's dog. Almost instantly he was out of the bunk at the window. Silhouetted in the moonlight on the brow of the little hill in front of the cabin were a number of men moving toward the cabin. The marshal counted eight.

He called to his companion. "Wake up, Hank, and come here."

Ransom struggled to consciousness. "Lord love ye, man, what are ye doing at the window?" he asked.

The dog was still barking savagely at the intrusion of so many night visitors.

"They've found out where I am and

are coming to get me," Gray replied.

The blacksmith joined him. "The scalawags are scattering to cover more ground." He lifted his Winchester from the wall.

"Any chance for me to slip out of the back door down to the rocks in the creek?" Jeff inquired.

"Not a chance," Ransom said grimly.

"Then I'll have to surrender. They'll only hold me prisoner, if Sherm Howard is running the show. His son is out at the L C. I'll step out with my hands up."

"Wait a minute," the old Indian fighter objected. "I'll go out and make a bargain with them. Better tie them up to an agreement. If there weren't so many I'd say for us to stand 'em off, but I don't reckon we can do that."

A gun cracked. The dog no longer barked.

The leathery face of the blacksmith twitched. "Some damned scoundrel has killed Laddie," he said.

"Yes. I'm going to wave the white flag and make terms, Hank. You're not in this."

He sat down on the bed, pulled on his boots, and buckled his gun belt round his waist.

"I'm not in this, ain't I?" the blacksmith blazed. "After they've killed my Laddie?"

The marshal returned to the window. The men outside were about sixty yards from the house. Jeff put a hand on the shoulder of his friend. "We've got to play our cards the way they are dealt us, old-timer. I'm going out with my hands up. You stay under cover. After they have me they won't bother you."

Gray unbolted the door and whipped it open. He stepped into the moonlight and lifted a hand, palm out.

There was a yell of rage. A bullet knocked a dirt chip from the adobe wall back of the officer. Another dusted his hat. The roar of a rifle deafened him. From just back of him Ransom had fired.

Lead spattered against the building. Hank lurched against his shoulder and fell.

"I'm hit," he cried, and caught at his right leg.

Jeff snatched the rifle from him. "Crawl back into the house," he ordered.

"Come on, boys, we've got him," a voice shouted.

The line of attackers moved forward. The marshal fired and missed—fired again and hit. A running man cried out and stopped abruptly. The others faltered. Their guns barked angrily.

Gray stepped back into the house and slammed the door.

"Get any of 'em?" his companion asked.

"One." The officer was at the window. "For right now they've had enough and are hunting cover. Hurt bad?"

"My leg is plugged. It's not bleeding so bad. I reckon the bullet missed an artery."

"Look after you in a minute," Jeff said. "Got to fix the fort so we can hold it."

He found an ax and knocked a bunk to pieces. Ransom told him where to find nails. The window he boarded up, leaving an inch or two for a loophole. Both doors he barricaded as best he could. Meanwhile Ransom crawled across the floor and with a hatchet cut a spyhole in the adobe wall.

During this time bullets had been striking the house. Jeff guessed they were being fired at random. Presently

the attackers would gather for a discussion, after which they would probably rush the place. As Gray moved to and fro about the work, he stopped every few seconds to look out and make sure the enemy were not crowding in for the charge.

"We'll look at that leg now, Hank," he said.

"All I want is for you to tie a towel round it to stop the bleeding," the blacksmith said stoutly. "We got no time for fancy business."

Gray saw the wound was not serious. He washed and bandaged it, always with an eye and mind upon the attack, then went back to the loophole.

"No use loadin' ourselves, Hank. They'll get us, unless a miracle happens. I'm worried about you. Hadn't been for me you wouldn't have been in this. If I could make a deal with them to let you go."

"Now you sure are loadin' yoreself, boy," Ransom told him irritably. "You know doggone well that if you show yore nose to make peace talk they'll crack down on you."

"Would they let you go then?"

"No, sir," the blacksmith retorted emphatically. "Dead men don't tell any tales, they would figure. Why would they leave a witness to make trouble for them later?"

"Makes it nice for you, Hank," Gray said bitterly. "I blow in on you with a wolf pack at my heels."

The blacksmith rolled a cigarette, his tanned leathery face unmoved. "I'm no pilgrim, boy, and I don't bellyache when hell pops. A fellow has to take the fat with the lean. Me, I'm what you might call a fatalist. I haven't hung my saddle on a peg yet. Not by no means."

Ransom sat on the floor. With the hatchet he was making another hole in the wall through which to shoot. The adobe crumbled fast under the impact of his powerful blows.

"I'd like first rate to get that bull rattler Morg Norris," he went on. "I've a notion if we picked off that slit-eyed *cabron*, and maybe one or two more, the rest of the lads would drag it."

Gray was of another opinion. By this time the whole village would know what was going on, and the attackers would be recruited if necessary by others. Reinforcements were likely to come in from the hills.

"I certainly picked me a top hand for a partner this trip," he said lightly. "They're beginning to close in on us. I better discourage that."

He took aim at a dodging figure and fired.

"Get him?" asked Ransom, scraping the dirt out of the hole he had dug.

"No. Some of them are moving up the hill. Going to take us in the rear, I reckon."

The rifle of the blacksmith boomed. Hank gave a yell. "One of 'em won't take us in front or rear. He's down."

A bullet tore through the window and the plank with which Jeff had shuttered it. It broke a glass in the cupboard. The defenders could hear others showering dirt from the adobe wall.

Ransom dragged his wounded leg across the room to his loophole in the rear.

"Where did those fellows go?" he asked after a time. "No sign of them back here."

"That's funny. They headed toward the rimrock. Four or five of them."

"Love of Moses!" the old soldier cried. "They're going to crash boulders down on us."

The marshal knew at once that Ran-

som was right. The cabin lay in the path of an old slide. At the edge of the rimrock, a hundred feet above them, lay hundreds of loose boulders large and small. A half ton of rock, hurtling down that precipitous slope, would crash through the soft adobe wall as if it were paper.

"I've got to stop that, Hank," the younger man said. "The firing down here is a bluff to keep our minds busy. I'm going up to stop their game if you don't mind sticking it out here alone."

"They'll pick you off before you've gone a dozen yards, boy," the blacksmith told him.

"Maybe not. The moon is under a cloud now. For one thing they won't be expecting me up there."

"They must have someone watching the back door."

"Not near enough to see in this darkness. See you later, old-timer." Jeff tore down the planking with which he had reinforced the back door.

Ransom said, "Sure," and did not believe that either of them would be alive an hour from then.

"Bolt the door after me. I may come back on the jump. Be ready to let me in *prontito*." The marshal opened the door and slipped out.

Chapter Thirty-Six

The Barriers Fall

CLOUDS were scudding across the sky. Jeff lay behind a woodpile, eyes and ears alert. Someone must have been sent to make sure the trapped men did not escape by the back door. Gray wished he knew whether he had been observed. If he moved from the shelter of the woodpile he was likely to find out.

He crept up the hill, taking advantage of every rock and bit of cactus that would give him cover. From the front of the house came the occasional crack of a gun. This was good news, since it told him the attackers were not rushing the house yet but were waiting for the rock-rolling brigade to drive out the doomed men.

Jeff had to move cautiously at first. When the moon showed for a moment or two between the flying clouds the marshal lay huddled on the ground.

As he worked up the steep incline to the foot of the rimrock there came to Jeff the sound of voices. He listened, but could not make out the words. The speakers were farther to the left.

The rimrock was sheer but rugged. Jeff found foot and hand holds. To the bushes growing out of the crevices he had to trust his weight while swinging from one ledge to another. He was close to the top when a sound brought him to rigid stillness.

A man was standing on the crest just above him. He was striking a match to light a cigarette. For a moment the flare of light showed Jeff a face he did not recognize, yet one that seemed oddly familiar. The marshal did not wait for discovery.

"Gimme a hand here, pardner," he drawled.

The match went out. "Who in hades are you?" a heavy voice rasped.

"I'm Bud Taylor," Jeff said evenly. "Sherm sent me with a message."

The man above lent a hand to pull the climber over the edge. Looking at the iron-gray hair, the scarred cheek, the shifty eyes, Jeff remembered where he had seen that face before. It had been on a photograph beneath which

had been written the caption: *Clint Doke. Wanted for the robbery of the Texas & Southern Flyer.*

A fraction of a second later the light of recognition began to dawn on the hairy face of the outlaw. Doke opened his mouth to let out a cry. Already Gray's fist was traveling in a powerful short-arm jolt toward the drooping chin. The cry materialized as a strangled groan, and the outlaw pitched down as if he had been hit with the back of an ax.

Jeff did not dare to leave him to recover in a minute or two. He pistol-whipped the fallen man across the temple. His gun he kept for immediate use.

Someone called, "Come here, Clint."

Jeff stepped behind a boulder. He could see three men grouped together against the skyline. With Doke's gun he fired three times rapidly above their heads.

One of the men gave a yell of consternation. He started to run. Another fired in the direction of the marshal. Jeff pumped lead at him.

"Let's get out, Mile High," the third man shouted shrilly. "We're being bushwhacked."

Mile High flung one last defiant shot and followed his companions into the darkness.

Jeff stepped forward to the place where they had been standing. He found a gunny sack, inside of which were some sticks of dynamite. A fuse lay beside it. Evidently they had been about to fire a charge from a crevice in a great boulder. The cabin lay in a direct line beneath this rock.

The officer flung the fuse from the bluff and hid the dynamite in the brush. He started to descend the rimrock. At the foot Jeff broke into a jog trot, reckless of being seen by the watcher at the back.

Abruptly he stopped. Four or five figures came into the open, as if from the creek bed, and ran toward the cabin. He heard shouting, but could not make out the words. There was the crack of a gun. The figures vanished into the house. From inside it came the crash of revolvers.

Jeff Gray's heart died within him. He knew that Ransom had been killed. The old soldier had come to his death after he had apparently deserted him.

Sick with despair, Jeff turned to the left, reached the foot of the slope, and dropped down into the creek. He could neither see nor hear anybody. Through the brush he made a circuit and reached the cottonwood grove. Occasionally he could hear the spitting of guns.

The best thing he could do was to get down to the Alamo Corral and force Reynolds at the point of a gun to lend him a horse. If possible, he must ride back to the L C and get the reinforcements Lee Chiswick had promised. He knew that Lee could stir up some of the other cattlemen and that a large fighting force could be organized.

That excitement in the village had reached a high point he could see. Many men were in the street, most of them farther up town in the little business center. He had to wait for a chance to get across the road unobserved.

He took the street at a run and swarmed over the same wall he had gone over on the night of his adventure with Frank Chiswick. He passed the blackened site of the stable that had been burned, crossed the creek, and

moved down along its bank.

Another burst of gunfire filled the night. Jeff could not understand this. There were too many people afoot. As he made a circle around the Presnall boarding-house three men carrying rifles walked toward him. He did the only thing possible, dodged into the same door he had entered some hours earlier when he had been looking for Curly.

The men stopped to talk for a moment at the door. One of them was coming into the house, Jeff gathered from what he said. Gray went gingerly up the stairway. He heard a crisp "See you later," and knew that the man was coming upstairs too.

Jeff had no time to pick and choose. He whipped open the first door he saw, walked into a room, and closed the door behind him. On the table there was a lighted lamp.

At the window a woman stood, clean-limbed and slender. She turned toward him a haggard face, eyes shadowed and fear-filled. For an instant she looked at him incredulously. Her amazement was no greater than his own. The woman was Ruth Chiswick.

A dressing-gown, open at the throat, was wrapped tightly around her lithe, long body. Jeff was aware, without giving the matter any weight, that Nelly lay asleep in the bed.

"You!" she cried. "I thought—I was afraid—"

"What are you doing here?" he asked.

"I made Father bring me. He came to help you—after Lou Howard got away."

"Got away?"

"Morgan Norris killed Buck Conrad and freed him."

"How many men has your father?"

"Four beside himself. Others will be here after a while."

"How many more?"

"I don't know. Six or seven. And the word is being passed to other cattlemen. They will send men too."

She broke down, with a sob. After so many hours of desperate fear it was too much to find him not dead but alive and full of the energy that seemed in him so much more vital than in others.

Ruth cried, in explanation, "We heard firing as we came in to town."

Jeff flung out a hand, to push the memory from him. "They—killed Hank Ransom, my friend, who was hiding me."

"How did you escape?" she murmured.

"I wasn't there. I left him—alone—after he was wounded."

"No!" she denied. "It isn't true."

"I thought I had to go, to save us. Before I got back they had him."

She moved closer, filled with pity for him. "He would understand—if he were alive," she said gently.

The faint tender smile on her lips, the wistful eagerness to comfort him, were too much for his self-restraint. He caught her to him—held her warm breathing body close and looked down into the lovely face.

Waves of emotion crashed through her. She clung to him.

Again guns sounded. Jeff held her for a moment, listening, his body tense and rigid.

"I've got to go," he said.

"Go where?"

"I must join your father. There is still fighting."

"How can you get to him? If you're seen on the street—"

"I'll get to him."

Her brown arms, soft and warm, were about his neck, fingers inter-

laced. Jeff broke the hold, gently, but with irresistible strength.

Without a word, with no good-by, abruptly, he turned and walked out of the room.

Nelly was still sleeping peacefully, an arm flung across her eyes to shield them from the light.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

Norris Pays a Debt

THE barking of Ransom's dog upset the plans of Morgan Norris for a surprise. Since the loud and angry protest of Laddie at his presence annoyed him, Norris followed his impulse and killed the animal.

Mile High did not like it. To kill a man was one thing, but to kill a faithful dog quite another.

"What's the idea in that?" he asked resentfully.

The killer snarled something. What he said was not important. Gray had come out of the cabin and was standing in the moonlight, his open hand raised.

Norris gave a derisive yell and fired. Others in his crowd followed the example set. Hank Ransom was beside the marshal now. He blazed away with a rifle. A moment later he went down and Gray had snatched up the Winchester. The wounded man crawled back into the cabin. His companion retreated, still answering the fire of the attackers, and slammed the door after him. One of the outlaws sat on the ground. He was nursing a shattered elbow and cursing violently.

"Find cover, boys," Norris ordered. He could have saved his breath. The others were already on their way to get out of sight.

Norris sent two men to make a wide circle and get to the rear of the cabin. "If they try to make a break crack at them. We'll be there on the jump."

For some minutes there was desultory firing. The attackers moved closer, but gave that up when a second man was wounded.

Mile High got an idea. "Let's dynamite the rocks above and send them down on the cabin. They'll come scuttling out like rabbits if the avalanche doesn't kill them."

A man was sent to get dynamite from Sanger's store. When he returned Mile High led a party to the rimrock. Before he succeeded in sending a big boulder crashing down on the adobe cabin he was driven away by a surprise attack. As they retreated to join their companions below he noticed that one of them was missing.

"Anybody seen Clint Doke?" he asked.

"They must have got him up there," someone said.

The gunfire below became more rapid. They could see the flashes in the darkness of the exploding shots.

"There's a heap of shooting from that cabin," a black-browed outlaw grumbled. "Looks to me like there are more than two men there."

They found Norris and the man with him backing away from the battle. He was in a vile humor. At the last moment victory had been snatched from him. Allies had poured in on the defenders.

"Thought you were going to wipe out the cabin with boulders from above," he snarled.

"Before we got started a bunch of men attacked us, killed Clint Doke, and

drove us away," Mile High explained. "I'm askin' you where all these warriors came from."

"I aim to find that out right damn now," Norris said savagely. "I'll give you my guess. That double-crossing son of a gun Sherm Howard threw down on us and sent word to Chiswick and his friends to come collect us. The rat figures we're sunk and he's trying to suck up to the law to save his own hide."

"Maybe not, Morg. Sherm's a wily old bird. He may wiggle us out of this jam yet. We don't even know who these men are who jumped us."

"Outside of Chiswick and his cattle friends this country is filled with absentees when it comes to gunmen ready to tackle me and my crowd," Norris retorted angrily. "Get the boys together, Mile High, and don't let them separate. Meet you at the Golden Nugget in half an hour."

"Where you going now?"

"I'm aimin' to have a li'l talk with Sherm Howard," the killer said out of the corner of his thin-lipped mouth. "He'd better have a good story to tell me too."

"I'll go with you," Mile High said hurriedly.

Norris swung round on him, standing on the balls of his feet, angry eyes glaring through slitted lids. "By God, you won't."

Mile High looked at him for a long moment, then gave way with a shrug. There was no doing anything with Norris when he was in a rage. Trust Sherm Howard to talk some sense into his head. The old fox would know how to handle Morg.

The outlaw did not find Sherman Howard at home. After pounding on the door for some time he roused Lou, who demanded sleepily what Norris wanted.

"I want the old man," Norris cried with an oath. "Where is he?"

"That you, Morg? I dunno where he he is. I been asleep. Last time I saw him was at the Golden Nugget."

"Get up and dress," the bad man ordered harshly. "There's a heluva war on and you can't duck it."

"What you mean, a war?"

"Chiswick's warriors are in town. They've done killed Doke and wounded two-three more. You're in this, fellow, and don't you forget it."

Lou reluctantly dressed and joined the other.

"Scoot down to the cottonwood grove and report to Mile High," the bandit told him. "See you show up *pronto*. If you don't, I'll take care of you personal. Understand?"

Norris turned on his heel and swaggered away, fury still burning within him.

He walked into the back door of the Golden Nugget. Men stood around in groups, all of them armed, though in some cases the weapons were concealed. For by this time all Tail Holt knew that a showdown was at hand.

Morg Norris was a marked man as he walked to the bar. The talk suspended, and all eyes rested on him. He was the fighting spearhead of the lawless forces, just as Sherm Howard was the directing brain. Men watched him, to get a clue to future action. They meant to play safe. If the outlaws were going to win, they wanted to be with them at the finish. But if law was coming into the mesquite, if the day of the killer and the thief was at an end, they wanted to make overtures to Chiswick, or in case they had gone too far for that, to slap a saddle on a bronc and leave

swiftly for parts unknown.

Norris ordered a drink and asked curtly where Sherm Howard was.

The bartender Pete nodded a head toward the office.

"How are cases, Morg?" someone asked with what indifference he could assume.

The killer showed his teeth in a snarl. "Fine. How would they be going?"

"I hear Chiswick is in town with a bunch of his men," another said casually.

Morg took the drink at a gulp. "You hear correctly."

He turned his back on them and walked into the office, closing the door behind him. In the room were three men, Sherman Howard, Curt Dubbs, and a man named Yorky who usually hovered close to the stout man. It was generally understood he was a guard.

The three men looked up. Howard felt a premonition of disaster. He said, "Any news, Morg?"

Norris moved a little closer, carrying his body with a lithe, catlike grace. His shallow eyes were narrowed to shining slits. The face of the man was venomous.

"Plenty," he snarled.

The heart of the big man died. He wanted to call out a warning to Yorky, but he dared not. His glance darted here and there, seeking help. The muscles of his fat face twitched as he fought to control himself. The man had come to kill him. He did not doubt that.

"Did you get Gray?" Yorky asked, his chair tilted back against the wall.

"No, we didn't get Gray," the outlaw answered with a sneer. "We weren't sent to get Gray, but for him and his crowd to get us. You'll be glad to know, Howard, you double-crossing coyote, that yore friends Gray and Chiswick have rubbed out Clint Doke and maybe others. Tracy they have wounded. Menger too."

Howard raised a trembling hamlike hand in protest. "Don't talk foolishness, Morg. Why would I throw down on the boys and join up with my enemies? You ought to know me better than that. It doesn't make sense."

"Rats leave a sinking ship, don't they? Sure I know you—clear through. You tried to have me bumped off before. Now you've sent for Chiswick's crowd. Trying to play in with them and save yoreself."

"Listen, Morg. Don't get excited. Listen to me." Howard made a motion to raise himself from the seat.

Norris whipped out a .45 and fired three times. Howard caught at his stomach and sank back into the chair. Any one of the bullets would have been fatal.

The wolfish face of the killer turned on the others. "Want any of my game, either of you?" he demanded.

"We're not in this, Morg," Yorky said. "If you and Sherm had a difficulty that wasn't our business."

"You bet it wasn't." Norris went on exultantly: "I'll take care of this show, boys. I'm sending a call for the boys to come in from the hills."

"Sure. Sure. That's the way." Dubbs got his approval out hoarsely from a dry throat.

"We'll go into the other room and tell the boys," Norris swaggered. "And don't throw me down if you're figuring on health."

He herded them into an outer room and explained to a dozen excited men that he had killed Howard because he was betraying them. They listened to his promise to destroy Gray and sweep

the cattlemen out of Tail Holt. Vocally they promised to back him, but none of them spoke without mental reservation. They did not intend to commit themselves to a war that was getting too big for them.

While Norris still had the floor the door opened and a man staggered into the room. His face was bloodstained from a gash over the temple.

Norris stared at him. "I heard they had got you."

"He left me for dead," Doke explained.

"Who did?"

"Jeff Gray." He told his story.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

Law in Tail Holt

JEFF slipped around the corner of the Presnall house to the road. Nobody was in sight within fifty yards, but as he looked he heard the drumming of horses' hoofs crossing the bridge at the end of town. He drew back into the shadow of the building to let the riders pass.

To the surprise of Gray the party drew up at the Presnall house. A young fellow swung from a saddle and moved forward. He recognized Bob Chiswick, and at once called his name and stepped out to meet the boy.

"By Jupiter, you're alive," Bob cried.

"Why yes, was there a rumor I had been sick?"

"Have you seen Father? He hurried ahead of us to help you."

"No, but I've heard him. Listen."

Three times a revolver barked.

"Sounds like it was up at the head of the street, somewhere near the Golden Nugget," Bob said.

He had guessed accurately. The bullets from that gun had been fired by Norris into the body of Sherm Howard.

"We'd better find your father, first off," Gray said. "He was fighting near the Ransom house half an hour ago. We might take a look over that way."

"My sister is here too. I want to make sure she's all right."

"She is. I've just left her."

They moved through the cottonwoods, Gray riding behind Bob. In the shadowy moonlight they caught sight of men approaching.

Gray shouted, "Who goes there?"

The voice of Chiswick answered. "That will be near enough, if you're not looking for trouble."

"We're L C men, Father," Bob cried. "Bob—and Pat—and the others."

Someone in Lee's party let out a yell of delight. In another moment the two groups had mingled.

"You have a wounded man," Jeff said, looking down at a form stretched on a door.

"You should know it, boy," a voice answered. "You were there when I got the pill."

Jeff Gray found himself trembling.

"Is it you, Hank?" he asked. "I thought—"

"Sure it's me. Chiswick and his lads got to the cabin in time to save me."

The marshal knew now he had made a mistake. The men he had seen rushing across to the adobe house had been their friends, and the shots heard after they reached it had been directed at the outlaws.

Gray softly gripped the hand of the wounded man. "Might have known they couldn't kill you, old-timer," he said gently. "But they sure had me worried."

"I was worried some myself," Ransom said dryly.

They carried the blacksmith to the Presnall House and put him into the room next the one occupied by Curly Connor. Ruth showed up, white-faced.

"Who has been hurt?" she asked.

"Hank Ransom. If you can't sleep you can stay with Hank and kinda nurse him," Chiswick told his daughter. "Can't afford to leave a man. We're liable to be mighty busy when day breaks, and that will be right soon. Our friends from the W J M and the Lazy B ought to be here early. We'll have from twenty to thirty men."

"Is there going to be a fight?" she asked Gray.

He answered gravely, "Up to them."

"You mean—a battle?"

"Not if I can help it. If we're strong enough the outlaws will give way. But I mean to capture Howard, Norris, Doke, Mile High, and two or three others. They are desperate men. I wouldn't expect them to surrender tamely."

"You'll be careful," she begged.

"I'm always careful. The breaks are with the officer and against the outlaw. Remember that."

"I'm afraid."

"Don't be. I'm in no more danger than yore father and brothers. We'll laugh about this later."

"I—hope so," she said, biting her lower lip.

The men poured out of the house as suddenly as they had arrived. Ruth sat by the wounded man, gave him water, bathed his fevered head, and never for a moment knew a relaxation of tense nerves. A hundred times she went to the window.

It was light now. She could see men moving to and fro in groups, all of them armed, she was sure. If there were any innocent bystanders they kept off the streets. Once she saw cowboys riding into town, and she recognized among them Don Russell of the Lazy B. They were reinforcements for her friends.

The headquarters of the outlaws were at the Golden Nugget. The cowboys concentrated in the cottonwood grove across the street from Ma Presnall's boarding-house. Since the break of day there had been no firing.

Gray called Chiswick aside. "I'm going up with a white flag to the Golden Nugget. Any minute something is liable to start. We can't have that."

"They'll shoot you down sure," the cattleman protested at once.

"I don't think so," the officer demurred. "Howard doesn't want any massacre. He knows that won't buy him anything."

"What you going to tell them?"

"I'm going to tell them the truth—that I want Howard, Norris, and some of the others. The rest aren't in it. When they know that, the ones we don't want will melt away. They aren't in a sweat to buck the United States government."

"I'll go with you."

"I'd rather you didn't."

"Some of the boys will listen to me who wouldn't pay any attention to you. Five or six of them have worked for me."

"This is my bear fight."

"It's mine too," Chiswick insisted. "We're busting up the gang that have been rustling my stock."

Jeff gave up with a shrug.

After giving directions to Dan Brand, the two men walked up the street toward the enemy. Jeff waved a white handkerchief.

Yorky called from the door of the

gambling-house to ask them what they wanted.

"Want to see Sherm Howard," Gray said.

From doors and windows up and down the street on both sides they could see men peering at them. Mile High came into the open.

"You can't see Sherm. He's dead."

Chiswick stared at the lank puncher. "Dead?"

"That's what I said."

This was stunning news. Jeff had depended upon Howard. Villain though the man was, he was a shrewd and wily schemer who used his brains. Sherm knew that wholesale killing in the open would be fatal to his cause. It would be his policy to avoid it and depend upon trickery to escape later. Now his influence against explosive violence would be lost.

In the air there was an electric tension such as that which just precedes a storm. Gray felt there might be one chance, not to escape a fight but to avoid being the victims of a massacre. That was to tell his story, swiftly, convincingly.

"Who's running yore show?" Jeff asked.

Out of the Golden Nugget walked Morgan Norris. "I'm running it, fellow," he said. "If you want to know, I bumped off Howard because he was a double-crossing son of a gun."

Gray spoke, his voice strong and clear, for all to hear. "I've nothing to say to you, Norris, except that I'm going to drag you to prison where you will be hanged for yore crimes. But I'll talk to some of the men you're leading astray. I represent the United States government. We're going to clean up this county. I'm serving notice. The worst of you are going to be rubbed out. The others had better get good right damn now. I'm going to get my men. By noon we'll have fifty cowboys with us. Take my advice and leave this murderer and his crowd. If you don't, you'll get in as bad as they are."

Norris moved forward, his thin, cruel mouth set in a straight line.

"So you aim to drag me to the gallows, do you?" he snarled, his white teeth showing. "Me, Morg Norris!"

Mile High walked into the street to join Norris. In a doorway to the left appeared Clint Doke, a revolver in his hand.

"Put up that gun," ordered Chiswick sharply.

Norris's hand swept up from his thigh, a Colt's .44 in it. There was a streak of light, a roar. Five guns blazed. Everybody vanished from sight except the combatants.

Lanes of fire crossed. Through smoke men's bodies loomed, shifting to and fro, padding here and there like those of animals. The crash of revolvers—the cursing of men—the sudden scream of one hit—all filled the air with dreadful tumult. A rift in the smoke showed Jeff a man on his knees, snarling oaths, still firing at him. The man was Norris. From the officer's gun flame darted. He felt a stab of pain and gave it no attention. Norris was sinking lower. His head touched the dust. The weapon dropped from his hand.

Chiswick was still on his feet. So were both the other outlaws. Smoke—shouts—oaths—hideous faces looming out of the fog. Jeff met Mile High and felt the crash of a gun barrel on his hat. He closed with the tall puncher and clung fast to him, swaying with dizziness and hanging to the pistol arm that waved wildly, trying to get a shot into Gray's body. Another face came

out of the mist. An arm swept up and down. Mile High's grip relaxed. He staggered against a wall and slid down.

The noise of the guns had died down. Men came out from open doors cautiously, no weapons in their hands. Only three of the outlaws had taken part. Norris lay still in the dust. Mile High was unconscious, pistol-whipped. Clint Doke had vanished.

"All right with you?" Jeff asked his companion.

"Fine. And you?"

Gray's head was getting clearer. He stepped across to Norris and examined him. The killer was dead.

"Where is Doke?" the marshal asked harshly.

"He ran into Sanger's," someone said.

Jeff said to the cattleman, "Hang on to Mile High," and walked into Yell Sanger's store.

Doke was trying frantically to unbar the back door. He turned, crouched and panic-stricken.

"Keep back," he yelled, and fired.

A moment later he dropped, a bullet hole in his forehead.

The marshal steadied himself against the counter, then turned and walked slowly back to the street. He looked round on those in sight.

"Any more of you want to give it a whirl?" he asked grimly.

Nobody accepted the invitation. All men knew that law had arrived at Tail Holt to stay.

Jeff gave curt orders. "Every man of you shuck his guns. I'll put one of my boys in Sanger's store to check them when you turn them over. There will be no more helling around. Inside of two-three hours I'll let you know who I want. The rest of you will be free to go."

He put handcuffs on Mile High. Already the cowboys were arriving on the run. Chiswick held up a restraining hand.

"Hold your horses, boys," he said. "Everything is fine and dandy. A few of the dime-novel bad boys got all het up and we had to knock their ears down. The rest of the lads have decided to be good."

Before the hour was up a dozen of the rustlers and outlaws were riding into the brush. It was time to be seeking other pastures.

Ruth met Jeff at the front door of Presnall's and drew him into the sitting-room.

"Are you all right—you and Father both?" she asked anxiously.

"All right," he answered cheerfully. "And our job is done. The boys will eat out of our hands now."

"Frank told me," she cried softly. "It was a crazy thing you and Father did. You promised—"

"So I did. We wouldn't have gone if we had known Sherm Howard was dead. But it turned out fine."

"Yes. Yes." She went on, with a little flare of possessive feminine ferocity: "But I won't have you doing things like that—now."

"Never again," he promised, smiling into her troubled eyes. "I've been talking with yore father. I'm going to quit the service and go into cattle."

"Thank God."

"You won't be afraid to marry me then, will you?"

Courage was in her eyes like a banner. For better or worse he was to be her man, as long as life lasted. She came to him, with a little gesture of surrender that won his heart.

THE END

TROUBLE MAN

By

Thomas Thompson

RED HAIR and Irish blue eyes and something inside that blows up now and then—any woman should know a man like that can respond to a challenge in only one way. First publication.

HE HAD WORKED UP from mucker to straw boss in the short span of two years and to him it had seemed like a lifetime. "You're too impatient, Johnny," Mike Devaney, the superintendent, told him. "You want to cram a lifetime into a week and it won't work."

Johnny O'Brion looked at the sun-baked slope of the mountain. He smelled the constant dust and felt the heat, but more than that he felt a ceiling over his head. He had reached the top and he knew it, and the top wasn't good enough. Not for a girl like Kate Devaney.

One of Bill Suggs's freight wagons toiled up the switchbacks of the slope and pulled into the yard. The tarp-covered bed of the wagon was piled high with supplies and the driver tossed down a sack of mail. Another hour or so and the wagon would be headed back toward town.

Johnny watched it and it kept pulling at him, magnifying his impatience, emphasizing his own small part in the scheme of things. He thought of a night in town with Kate, a little house, eventually, with other women for her to gossip with and kids in the front yard. A clean suit of clothes and a bank account. A wife never admitted it, but they liked bragging about things like that. He turned suddenly and faced his boss and the words rushed out.

"I'm quitting, Devaney. I'm going back down on that wagon."

Mike Devaney was a patient man. He had spent twenty years with Eagle Crest and he was secure in his little niche. But he had been young once and sometimes at night he watched the blue shadows coming up the mountain and felt the tug of invisible things that might have been. He took his pipe from his mouth and knocked it against the heel of his boot.

"Is that fair, Johnny?"

He was thinking of Kate, and Johnny knew it. "You don't want this for her," Johnny said. "You know it." He had to say it all at once. "She'd sit up here and bake and get to town once

a month at best and get old before her time—" He caught himself, thinking of Mike Devaney's wife. "I'm sorry, Mike."

"Jobs are scarce, Johnny," Mike said softly.

"A job's no damn good unless you make it yourself," Johnny said. He was a young man who wore his hat at an angle, his shirt collar open, his blue jeans low on his hips. He had Irish in his blue eyes and in his red hair and there was something inside him that blew up now and then. He saw the patient worry in Mike's eyes and he put his hand on the older man's shoulder.

"I'm not going to get drunk, Mike," he said. "And I'm not going to get into a fight."

Mike was thinking of how he had felt when he first noticed that roughneck Johnny O'Brion was paying so much attention to his daughter. He liked Johnny; he even admired his carefree attitude, his ability to make a friend out of a man by whipping him with his fists. But liking a man and approving of him as a son-in-law were two different things.

"You trying to run away from yourself, Johnny?"

"Look, Mike," Johnny said. "If you thought this was right for her here why did you let Kate go to work in the town office? You've said yourself this is no place for a woman and I've heard you say it."

"I'm not arguing with you, Johnny," Mike said. "But a man your age has got to have plans."

A half dozen men were unloading the Suggs's wagon. A clerk with some yellow sheets in his hand moistened a pencil stub with his tongue and checked a figure. He said something and an argument flared up. The driver's voice was louder than the rest.

"Soak your head, you pencil pushin' yahoo. I don't make the rates, I just haul the stuff. It's signed by Layne Corbin, ain't it? What the hell more do you want?"

Mike Devaney mopped his bald head with a bandanna. "Another rate raise," he said, half to himself. "I could pack the stuff on my back cheaper than Suggs hauls it."

Johnny O'Brion's eyes were bright. If a man needed a plan, here was one ready made— "How much has Corbin got to say about it?" he asked suddenly.

"About what?" Mike Devaney said.

"About who hauls in supplies and what they charge?"

"It's all on bids," Mike said. "One copy to the home office, one to Corbin, and one to me. He has to take the low bid, and that means Suggs. Either Suggs hauls it or it don't get hauled."

"But if there was another outfit and they offered to haul it at a cheaper

rate—" Johnny was way ahead of himself.

Mike Devaney had watched Johnny get an idea before, and now suddenly he knew what this one was. He shook his head. "Oh no you don't, me boy. I don't want to help bury you."

"But he'd have to accept the lower bid?" Johnny insisted.

"If it was filed by mail and the office and me had a copy—" Mike gripped Johnny's arm and steered him toward the office. "Now get the nonsense out of your head and listen to me. Eagle Crest is a big outfit and it's going to be here for a long time. There's a dozen other mines they own— Now I don't know if it'll go through—there's a sort of fixed rate for foremen—but I'll—"

Johnny O'Brion didn't hear the old story. A dollar a month raise, for which you were supposed to bow twice daily toward the eastern office. Another mine —but they were all the same. Dust, dirt, heat, and a future that was as fixed as if it had a fence around it. A girl deserved more. Especially a girl like Kate Devaney. The words went on and on and he answered when he felt like it and he didn't realize it was over until Mike Devaney made out his pay slip.

"You're crazy, Johnny," Mike said. "It's no different than getting drunk and getting into a fight, only this time you won't make any friends. God bless you, boy, and come home when you get tired. I understand, I guess, but I can't speak for my daughter."

Johnny rode the wagon down from Eagle Crest. The sunset was suddenly beautiful and the smell of sage and juniper was thick in the air. Even the swirling dust was good in his nostrils and he built a tune with his lips and pushed his hat further back on his red hair. The driver stared straight ahead between the swaying backs of the mules and once he cursed under his breath and Johnny O'Brion laughed. They came out of the hills and the sky was as big as an ocean and the stars nodded on silver stems.

Like wildflowers, Johnny thought. *Wildflowers for her hair—*

The money that was to have gone for a wedding suit paid a month's rent on an old barn and a corral. There was a tack room in the barn and when it was cleaned out it would make an office for the O'Brion Freighting Company. What savings he had made the down payment on six mules and a wagon and trailer.

The banker argued a bit but as Johnny said, "If I go under you can take them back and be ahead the down payment." The banker signed the paper and shook his head. With his last five dollars Johnny had a big steak and then he went to find Sam Cooley. He still hadn't told Kate Devaney.

Sam Cooley, a bundle of sixty-year-old skin and sinew, had driven mules at the mine until the other side of the hill called too loudly one night and he had walked out. A kindred soul, Johnny thought to himself. *He understands me and I understand him and he's the best mule skinner in seventeen states—*

He found Sam at Bergdorf's Saloon. He clapped Sam on the back and they exchanged greetings and Sam said, "The devil got to gnawin' on you, Johnny?" He shoved the bottle toward Johnny's hand.

Johnny pushed it aside with a show of ceremony. "A big businessman is careful with his drinking," he said. "Are you available for employment?"

"If that means do I want to come back to the mine," Sam said, "the an-

swer is 'no'."

"How about a job muleskinning for a new and growing freighting concern?"

Sam put down his glass. "Slow and easy now, son," he said. "Let me smell your breath and then tell me what I think you're gonna say."

"Us big executives don't waste words," said Johnny O'Brion. "Do you want a job with the O'Brion Company or not?"

"Do I get an advance on my wages?" Sam said.

"Not unless I rob a bank," said Johnny.

"I thought so," Sam said. He was thoughtful a long time and when he spoke his voice was soft. "What does Katie think?"

Johnny scratched the end of his nose. "I haven't told her yet," he said. "I wanted to surprise her."

"She'll be surprised, all right," Sam said.

"You'll take the job?"

"Only because I've never seen a man beat to death before," Sam said. He downed his drink with one gulp. "You're a damn fool, Johnny. Why don't you just go pick a fight with Bill Suggs, if you have to find out if you can whip him? After you get out of the hospital you can go back to work and you'll still have your money."

"Be careful how you talk to your boss," said Johnny O'Brion.

He had spread his blankets in the old tack room and he turned in early, but he didn't sleep. He had submitted his bid by mail, strictly according to regulations, and Layne Corbin would have it in the morning. He conjured up a vision of Kate Devaney's face in the darkness and he tried to picture the pleased surprise he would see in her eyes— The vision wouldn't quite shape up. He went to sleep finally, but it was a disturbed sleep.

The sun was thick on the town when he went to the Eagle Crest mine office. In front of Bergdorf's saloon a man who hadn't made it home dozed with his mouth open and the flies buzzed around his head. It was a rough town, with an edge of rawness about it. Men fought and sometimes men died and it was whispered that Tony Kusidor, the gambler, would kill a man for a price— He glanced back at the neat houses that sat along the creek and up on the hill he saw the Suggs Freighting Company barn. His mouth tasted dry and he wasn't hungry. He took a deep breath and entered the office.

The minute he saw her he knew she had seen his bid. She was a tall girl with creamy skin that the sun never changed. Her eyes were a deep blue, her lashes long and black. She had a cleft in her chin and her lips were full and red and he never looked at her without remembering the first time he had kissed her.

He said, "Hello, Katie," and then he couldn't say any more.

She got up from her desk and the skirt she wore accented the slimness of her waist and the white blouse with the puffed shoulders would have been wrong for anyone but her. She said, "Johnny, have you lost your mind?"

He grinned with his lips and had trouble with his eyes. "Now Katie—"

"But what about our plans? What about the house up at the mine?"

"We'll have to change our plans, Katie," he said, and now some of the old sureness was back in his voice. "A house in town with the hollyhocks as high as the eaves and kids in the yard.

How many kids, Katie?"

She turned quickly and called toward the closed door that led into the private office, "Layne, Mr. O'Brion is here."

"So he's Layne and I'm Mr. O'Brion," Johnny said.

Her voice was low, intense. "Johnny, what are you trying to prove? That you can whip Bill Suggs?"

"I want big things for you, Katie," he said. "You don't want to be stuck in a shack on a hillside."

The door opened and Layne Corbin stood there. He was a well-built man, no older than Johnny. He was wearing a finely tailored suit that was better than his job. There was a gold chain across his vest and on the chain was a green enameled four-leaf clover and a tiny gold horseshoe.

"Thank you, my dear," Corbin said to Kate, then to Johnny, "Come in, O'Brion."

"My dear," Johnny mocked behind his hand. "Doesn't he ever give up?" A worry wrinkle appeared briefly above the bridge of his nose. "Or does he still think he has a chance?"

He saw Kate's lips tighten and he went into the office without waiting for her answer. When a man had a girl as beautiful as Kate Devaney he had to expect competition.

Layne Corbin had a certain arrogance about him when he was behind his desk. He was fighting hard to keep it now and it was a losing battle. He took a white linen handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his forehead. He had Johnny's bid in front of him and he picked it up and then put it down again.

"I don't like this, O'Brion," he said.

Johnny sat down and tilted back in his chair. "Why?" he asked. "Just because it's me? I thought you'd be happy as a lark to save some money for the company."

"I would," Corbin said, "if I were sure I'd save anything." He put both hands against the edge of the desk and he was like a man fighting to steady himself. "You're a two-bit outfit, O'Brion," he said. "You know how Suggs feels about competition. What guarantee have I got that you can complete this contract?"

"I don't start things I can't finish," Johnny said. He could feel the color crawling up his neck. "You've got my bid and it's low. I've got the equipment and I know where to load. I'll be in to pick up the mail sack as soon as it's ready."

He stood up and now the anger was on the surface and he couldn't hold it back. "Don't keep messing in my affairs, Corbin."

Both Corbin and Kate Devaney, who was standing in the doorway, caught the double meaning. Kate flushed deeply and Johnny was sorry he had made the remark. But damn it, he had said what he had to say.

"I'll see you when I get back from the mine tonight, Katie," he said.

"I'm afraid I'll be busy tonight, Mr. O'Brion," she said. She smiled at Layne Corbin, but it was a weak, trembling smile and it was entirely false.

Johnny slammed his hat on his head and went outside. He nearly collided with Bill Suggs coming in.

Suggs was a giant of a man who had whipped every miner and teamster within a radius of fifty miles. A couple of freight lines had started up but after a few tangles with Bill Suggs's methods they had found it cheaper to sell out than to stay in business. Suggs was mad; it stood out all over him. He

started to shove by Johnny, and Johnny blocked his way.

"Good morning, Bill," Johnny said.

"You're smart as hell, ain't you?" Suggs said.

"Brilliant," said Johnny O'Brion.

"You ain't made a haul yet," Suggs said.

"But I will," said Johnny. "Today."

Suggs was not one to fight with words. The cords stood out on his neck and his face was red. He pushed by Johnny and Johnny heard his voice booming inside the office. He could hear Layne Corbin's agitated replies and then the voices were gone as the two men went into Corbin's private office.

Johnny started walking up the hill toward his rented barn. Sam was standing there, waiting for him.

"What did Suggs say?" Sam wanted to know.

"He made some noise," Johnny said. "Get hitched up and we'll load."

Sam kept rubbing his hand across his mouth. "I reckon Suggs would buy you out right now and give you a profit," he said finally. "Folks would say you sure pulled a smart one."

"I want to get started before noon," Johnny said. "I've got a date this evening."

"Have you?" Sam said. He started walking out toward the corrals.

"What do you mean by that?" Johnny said, his voice rising.

Sam shrugged his shoulders. "Nothin'," he said.

"You don't know a damn thing about it," Johnny said.

"No, reckon I don't," Sam said. "I only had one girl in my life. That is, one I loved." He spat at the ground and his faded blue eyes bored into Johnny. "Even give her a diamond ring once. Small one, it was. All I could afford. I kept figgerin' it wasn't good enough for her so I took it away from her, figgerin' I'd get her a bigger one. Finally did get a bigger one, too."

"So what happened?"

"She wouldn't take the big one," Sam said. "She liked the little one."

"Stick to muleskinning, will you?" Johnny said.

Johnny went into his bare office and in a little while he heard the wagon being moved around toward the narrow road that led to the street. He heard Sam's garbled commands to the mules, followed by his high-pitched cursing.

There was a quick vacantness in Johnny's stomach, a prickling on the back of his neck. He hitched at his belt and went outside. One of Bill Suggs's wagons was crosswise in the road, blocking Sam's way.

Bill Suggs was standing near the corner of the mule corral. His big hands were busy with mending a bridle, but his eyes weren't on what he was doing. He was a thick-set man with a battered face and a confidence that comes to a man who has never lost a fight. He saw Johnny coming and he took off his coat, feeling the sun suddenly reaching through to his flesh. He tossed the coat over a fence post and resumed his aimless work on the bridle.

Johnny was close before Suggs put down the bridle. He took time to hang it on the post and then he rolled his shirt sleeves back from his wrists and leaned against the fence, his left heel hooked over the bottom rail. There was a smile on his lips. It was not in his eyes.

He said, "You want something, O'Brion?"

"Get your wagon out of the way,"

Johnny said.

Bill Suggs laughed. He took his elbows from the top fence rail and rubbed the knuckles of his right hand into the palm of his left. His head had dropped lower into his heavy-muscled shoulders and it made him appear to have no neck.

He said, "Why don't you try to move it?"

Johnny half turned his head. Sam was standing there, his face drawn with worry. Johnny said, "Go ahead, Sam. Move it."

"Don't touch it, Sam," Suggs said.

"I guess there ain't no use putting it off, Bill," Johnny said softly.

"All right, O'Brion," Suggs said.

Suggs dropped his arms and for a second he was totally relaxed, a bull of a man, built like a wedge, a man who knew his strength and was proud of it. His lips drew tight, his head rolled to one side on his thick neck. The exertion of pulling all his muscles into play was in his face and then he lunged, his right fist drawn back close to his chest. Johnny saw it coming and he ducked into a low crouch, his knees nearly touching the ground.

It was all fast. Brutally fast. There was a terrifying power in Bill Suggs; it was all behind his fist. The fist skimmed across the top of Johnny's shoulder and Johnny straightened, the full drive of his legs propelling him upward. He felt his shoulder sink into Suggs's middle and then he gripped the freighter's legs and snapped his back.

Bill Suggs was lifted off the ground. He went over Johnny's shoulder and landed on his back on the hard ground of the slope. Johnny didn't wait for him to get up. He jumped on top of Suggs and the two of them rolled down the slope, their fists flailing, the dust of their silent struggle thick around them.

Somewhere below them in the town there was the single shouted word, "Fight!" Johnny drove his knee against Suggs's stomach and threw himself back and they were apart.

He saw Suggs on hands and knees, a huge growling beetle, and he drove his fist against the big man's face and watched Suggs shake his head and get to his feet. The town was around them now, a circle of strained faces and staring eyes and Bill Suggs was rushing toward him. He took the first blow with his shoulder and gave a wasted one in return.

Suggs kept coming, blood running from the corner of his mouth, his eyes squinted, his face slick with perspiration. A fist exploded against Johnny's temple. He was knocked backward by the force of it and he was caught by the circle of men who pushed him upright to take his punishment. He saw Tony Kusidor standing there, dark, silent, his hand resting on his gun.

Johnny got in a blow then; a good one that made Suggs back up. Johnny followed and saw his mistake too late. Suggs was waiting and his murderous fist cracked solidly against Johnny's jaw. The world exploded and Johnny fell and he heard the throaty voice of the crowd.

But he couldn't stay down. He couldn't be whipped. It kept going through his tortured brain and when he tried to breathe he sucked the thick dust into his nostrils. He saw a pair of legs. Bill Suggs's legs. He threw his arms around them, clinging frantically, like a drowning man, and he felt the jar of the earth as Suggs fell. They clinched and their tangled bodies crashed against the legs of the crowd

and they rolled over and over in the deep dust until the sting of it blinded them and the dirt matted with the blood and sweat that was on their faces.

They rolled down the slope and now they were at the top of the cut-bank that dropped ten feet to the street below them. The crowd stood above them in a semi-circle, a strangely silent crowd, sensing the kill. Even this much had been a rest and Johnny felt his head clearing. He had to outwit the man—

He got his right hand free and he smashed his fist against Suggs's throat. He heard the cough of pain and then he was free, standing on his feet, the life-giving air pouring into his battered lungs.

He needed to finish it now but he needed the air more. He waited until Suggs was up and he saw the big man coming at him, his shoulders slumped, his head swaying from side to side. He saw the hurt in Suggs's face and the elation was enough to give Johnny the strength he needed. Suggs was feeling his weakness and he was hating it and it was driving him like a hot iron against his spine. He threw himself forward, his hands no longer fists, his fingers spread, ready to rip and tear. Johnny waited and then he hit. He saw Suggs's head jar back.

He shifted position then, putting himself on the downhill side. He heard the bellow of rage from Suggs, saw the man bunching his legs for his charge. But this time Johnny was ready for it. He put his body and his shoulders into the blow and when it landed he saw Suggs's legs sag.

Suggs closed in. He was having trouble with his arms. There was a thick, sobbing sound coming from his battered lips. The sound of a man who is bewildered. Johnny let him come, ducking his wild blows, and when Suggs was close enough Johnny gripped the freighter's shirt front with his left hand, pulling the fabric tight, binding the big man's arms. He hit him then, a good deliberate blow that rocked Suggs's head. Then, still gripping the freighter's shirt, he turned Suggs around and hit him again. Suggs staggered back and Johnny let him go. He saw Suggs go over the bank, watched him roll like a sack of rags, saw him strike the hard surface of the street below them, his arms and neck loose, his left leg twisted beneath him.

For a second the fierce drive of battle remained in Johnny O'Brion's muscles and then it was gone. His hands were trembling and his legs were feeble beneath him. He turned, trying to walk erect, trying not to show the hurt that was in his body. The silent crowd parted and let him through and Tony Kusidor spat a match stick from his mouth.

The world was a bright bowl around his head and the sun was a blinding glare. He went to the steps that led down to the street and he saw Bill Suggs lying there in the road, a group of men around him. One man was the doctor.

The doctor said, "He got a broken leg in that fall. He'll come around in a minute, but he's got a broken leg."

Johnny O'Brion turned and walked down the middle of the street toward the town office of the Eagle Crest Mine. He knew that Sam was walking beside him and he said, "Get the wagon and get it loaded, Sam."

It hurt him to speak and he pushed Sam aside weakly and went on toward the mine office. He could see Kate's

face there in the window. He tried to smile at her and failed. The face was gone, but the strain and the hurt he had seen remained.

He waited awhile, wiping his face with his ruined sleeve, drawing the air into his complaining lungs. Then he opened the door and stepped inside, still wondering what he would say to her. There were a hundred things—defensive things—but he had said them all before. He thought of what they had been to each other when he was working for her father at the mine and he thought of the crazy nonsense that had grown up between them. Senseless phrases that meant nothing and meant everything. He looked at her and he tried to smile. He said, "Sure and this must be heaven, for I see an angel here."

He knew she had stood at the window, watching his fight, hating it and knowing she had to watch. There were marks in her palms where her rounded nails had bitten into the flesh as she gripped her hands. Watching him coming toward the office she wondered what he would say to her—what defense he would make this time—but instead of defending himself he said this old thing that was a joke between them.

She turned toward him, gripping the railing of the enclosure around her desk, and she could not hide the tears that smudged the blue of her eyes. He saw her face, white against the black of her hair, and the joke was dead and there were no words.

He said, "I came for the mail sack."

His shirt was ripped from his body and the blood was beginning to cake on his face. He felt weak and sick inside and he couldn't meet her eyes. He pushed through the wicket and opened the inner door without knocking.

Tony Kusidor was sitting in a chair in the corner of the office, his back to the wall, and Layne Corbin was behind the desk. Corbin was sweating and his face was chalk-white.

Kusidor was cleaning his fingernails with a pen knife. He raised his eyes and said, "Don't you knock when you come into a man's office?"

"Not always," Johnny said.

The mail sack was there in front of the desk. Johnny picked it up and tossed it across his shoulder. He saw Kusidor lower the chair.

Tony Kusidor was a thin man, dark, his face expressionless. He worked as a bouncer at Dutch Bergdorf's saloon and he ran a faro bank. He had killed a man one night and the town still talked about it. He always wore a gun and men left him alone. He closed the knife now and put it in his pocket and as he did he pushed back his coat and the gun was there in its holster.

"You play rough, O'Brion," he said. "Bill Suggs is a good friend of mine."

"Then go take care of him," Johnny said, "and stay away from me." He left the office and he felt a cold spot between his shoulder blades. He saw Kate watching him.

He looked at her and he thought of the senseless play of words. *I'll bring you wildflowers for your hair*, he used to tell her when the impatience was strong on him and he went to town to have his fun. He wanted to say that now, but he couldn't.

He went through the office and outside and she stood there watching him and there were tears in her eyes. She knew now that it was fear she felt for him and she knew that he was resenting that fear. It was as if she had lost faith in him— Johnny tried to square

his shoulders, knowing she was watching him, and he tried to build a tune on his battered lips, but it failed. He tossed the mail sack into the wagon which Sam had pulled up in the street and then he went down the street and turned in through the doors of Dutch Bergdorf's saloon.

The excitement of his fight with Suggs was inside the place but it was silent excitement. No man spoke as Johnny walked down the long bar, past the gambling equipment. The poker tables were in back but no one was playing. He walked straight through to the washroom in back. There were two men there but they left as soon as he entered. He pumped water into a basin, washed his face, and combed his wiry hair with his fingers. After that he beat the dust from his clothes and went back into the saloon and he saw that Dutch himself was behind the bar. He ordered a drink and Dutch set out the bottle.

There was a long silence that didn't end until Bergdorf said. "Tony Kusidor is looking for you."

Johnny had his drink and paid for it and he knew that Kusidor had come in through the door and was standing there, looking around. The gunman came up to the bar and leaned there facing the room, his elbows on the bar, his heels hooked on the rail. He didn't look at Johnny.

"Don't make that haul," he said.

Johnny finished another drink before answering. "Save your gun scare for Dutch's poker customers," he said.

Kusidor took a match from his teeth and broke it with his fingers. With his thumbnail he flipped the crippled match against Johnny's chest and then deliberately he let his gun belt out one notch and settled it more comfortably around his narrow hips. Johnny O'Brion walked out into the glare of the street and he turned up the slope toward his own barn.

He entered the bare office and threw himself down on the blankets and he felt the heat of the day pressing against him. He was alone now and he could recognize the aches and pains that were in his body and the sting of the ripped flesh that was on his face. The door opened and Sam came in. He had a bottle of whisky in his hand.

"Horse liniment," Sam said. "I thought you might need it."

Johnny made himself answer. "Give me an hour," he said, "and then I'll be ready. Get me a saddle horse. I want to get back early."

Sam went out and closed the door and Johnny O'Brion was sick from the beating he had taken and confidence was a hard thing to keep. He helped himself to a long drink from the bottle and then he tried to think and he tried to sleep and he could do neither. He was ready when Sam called him. He took a six-shooter, checked its loads, and thrust the gun into the waistband of his trousers before going outside to where Sam waited with the loaded wagon and the saddled horse.

He climbed up onto the seat of the wagon and saw the two rifles that were leaning there. He felt the grin tugging at the skin stretched tight across the swollen flesh of his face.

"Expecting trouble, Sam?"

Sam spat a stream of tobacco juice at the rump of the near mule. "Kusidor rode out of town about a half-hour ago."

"I figured he might," Johnny said.

Sam clucked to the team and turned the wagon out of the hard-packed yard down the slope toward the street of

the town. As they passed the mine office Johnny glanced toward the window, then away quickly. He didn't want to see her face. He heard Sam muttering under his breath and then they were at the end of the street turning into the narrow wagon road that led to Eagle Crest.

The sun lay hot on the hills like a giant, golden blanket. It burned against their backs and put white sweat-streaks on the mules where the harness touched their hides. The men were silent and there was only the sound of the straining harness, the grind of the wheels on the rocks of the road.

Johnny said, "Pull in at the next turn-out and give 'em a breather."

The saddled horse was following behind, tied to the tailgate. It was a common enough arrangement and one that would excite no suspicion. Johnny got down as soon as Sam had pulled the wagon into the shady turn-out and after the mules had taken a drink Johnny washed his face in the horse trough that was there.

"I'll ride on ahead," he said. "You take it slow. Wait for me at the next trough. If I'm not back in an hour you better turn around and go on back to town."

"You figure Tony is up at the summit?"

"I don't know," Johnny said. "I don't know anything."

He mounted the saddler and rode up the wagon road to where a trail cut up the slope through blistering rocks and scant stands of juniper. When he had ridden as far as he considered safe he dismounted, tied the horse, and went on on foot, taking the rifle with him. He knew this country as he knew the back of his hand, for he had prospected every inch of it before the strike was made at Eagle Crest. He remembered how the road cut between rocky cliffs with the trail above it. He studied the ground and saw the marks that told him a horse had been this way since last night's dew

He was perspiring freely by the time he reached the summit where he could look down at the wagon road. The sweat ran into his eyes and stung the cuts on his face. He wiped it away and squinted at the glare and then he saw Tony Kusidor waiting there on the top of the cliff, a rifle across his knees. Johnny worked his way down through a scant covering of juniper until he was about fifty yards above Kusidor. Johnny levered a shell into the rifle

Kusidor heard the sound and stumbled to his feet. As he did he dropped the rifle and his hand dipped quickly toward his belt gun. Johnny yelled a warning but old habit was stronger than good judgment with Kusidor. The gun cleared the holster and fired and Johnny felt the hot breath of the bullet fan by his cheek. He dropped flat on his stomach, a small rock his only protection. Kusidor's next bullet whined off the face of the granite.

Johnny fired once. He saw Kusidor duck for cover and then another bullet sang like a startled bee near Johnny's ear. Johnny lay still and waited. There was a long silence in which his heart beat loudly against his ribs and the sweat stung his eyes.

He called out then, "Don't be a fool, Tony. My fight is not with you." His answer was a bullet that spat rock dust into his eyes.

He saw a quick movement down the slope and he jerked the rifle to his shoulder and fired. The brush shook violently with a convulsive, threshing movement. There was a smashing

sound, a breaking of branches, then a dead stillness.

Johnny waited a long time, wondering if it was a trap, and then slowly he shifted his position, inviting a shot. There was only silence from the brush clump down the slope. After a while Johnny stood up and still there was no movement below him and he knew he had killed a man. He went down the slope and he found Tony Kusidor's crumpled body there in the smashed brush where he had fallen. There was a bullet hole in the side of Kusidor's head.

Johnny turned away and went back to where he had left his horse. He was violently sick.

He came to the turn-out where Sam was waiting with the wagon and he saw Sam put down the rifle. The mask of worry dropped from the old man's face to be replaced by a pose of practiced indifference.

Sam said, "Kusidor?"

"That's right," Johnny said. He was shaky inside. "Take the wagon on up, Sam. Give my regards to Devaney."

Sam didn't argue. Under his breath he said, "*Good luck, Johnny,*" and he put the team into the road and headed on up toward the mine.

Johnny O'Brion rode back to the town that was thick with the day's heat. The sun made a dizzy pattern on the rims of the buildings and the heat beat down the sounds and stifled the dust that rose from his horse's hoofs. He rode openly, and he went straight to the Suggs Freighting Company office. Bill Suggs, his face battered and swollen, his newly splinted leg propped on a pillow on a chair, glared at him.

"As soon as this leg is well, O'Brion," he said.

Johnny stood with his feet spread, his hands at his side. The six-shooter was obvious in the waistband of his trousers. He felt his lips tighten against his teeth.

"What does Tony Kusidor mean to you, Bill?"

The expression on Bill Suggs's face did not change. His thick lips moved slightly, his muddy eyes stared unblinkingly at Johnny. "Tony's a handy boy."

"He's a dead boy," Johnny said. "Does that change your plans at all, Bill?"

There was a faint flicker of expression in Bill Suggs's eyes and then it was gone. He said, "It don't change any of my plans. I don't hire my killing done."

Suggs was telling the truth, and Johnny knew it. He wasn't above killing a man, but he wouldn't hire it done.

Johnny said, "I believe you, Bill. I'll see you."

"As soon as my leg's well," Bill Suggs said.

So there was more to it than just the fact that Suggs didn't want any competition. Johnny thought of the fear he had seen in the eyes of Layne Corbin and then he thought of the gold chain with its four-leaf clover and its horseshoe talisman such as a gambler might wear. He had the answer then and he wondered why he hadn't seen it long before.

He rode his horse to the mine office and dismounted. He went inside and he saw Kate stand up and the worry that was on her face stabbed through him because he knew he had put it there. She started toward him, her arms reaching for him.

He said, "Go outside, Kate."

"No more, Johnny," she pleaded.

"Please, no more—"

He said, "Go outside."

She had her arms around him now. He pushed them down and went on through the door into the inner office. He heard her sobbing behind him. Layne Corbin was there, hurriedly stuffing things into a valise. Johnny leaned against the wall, his thumbs in his waistband, his right hand near his gun.

He said, "It's no good, Corbin. You can't run from it."

Corbin's handsome face was twisted with fear. Every weakness that was in the man was visible now. He pushed himself back against the wall of the office and slumped there like a cornered rat.

"You're crazy, O'Brion," Corbin said. He spoke in a hoarse, strained whisper, his lips pulled back from his teeth. "I don't want your girl. I don't want anything from you. Keep your fight with Suggs. I don't give a damn about you and your freight line."

"You yellow rat," Johnny said.

"I don't give a damn—"

"Except that you know you can't deal with me the way you did with Suggs," Johnny said. "You can't get a kick-back out of high rates if I do the hauling." He drew his six-shooter and tossed it on the desk. "Tony didn't get me today, Corbin," he said. "What are you going to do about it?"

He saw Corbin standing there, his back pressed against the wall, his lips slack, his guilt obvious in his eyes. The gun lay on the desk between them, its handle toward Corbin. He watched the muscles tense in Corbin's arm, saw the momentary hope, then Corbin lunged. Johnny's fist caught him in the center of the face.

Corbin went down in a heap, his hands pressed to his broken face. He started to whimper like a whipped kid. "Wait a minute, O'Brion. Let me talk to you—"

"Get to hell out of town, Corbin," Johnny said. "And don't take time to pack."

He turned his back and walked out of the office, knowing Layne Corbin didn't have the guts to use the gun. He saw Kate standing there and he knew she had seen it all.

She wasn't crying yet. That would come later. He crooked his finger under her chin and tilted her head until he could look into her eyes and everything that had been between them was there and he wanted it always to stay there. She reached up and touched his face and it was the same face she had touched a hundred times.

She said, "Your nose is all swollen." It was hard for her to speak with her throat so tight.

He said, "The swelling will go down, Kate. It always does."

"But there's still Bill Suggs," she said. She was still arguing with him, still afraid for him, telling him it had to stop.

Once he would have argued back and given defenses. But that was no good, he knew it now. It led to nothing.

He said, "Yes, Kate. There's still Bill Suggs. There's always something, you know."

She saw then that this was the kind of answer he would always give, if he were to tell the truth. This was the same man with whom she had first fallen in love. He hadn't changed, but she had changed because her love had brought a fear for him that she hadn't known before. And now the tears were close and he saw them. He put his arms around her and held her, his lips near

her ear, and he thought of the old senseless patter that had been between them.

He kissed her cheek and his voice caught in his throat when he said, "I'll bring you wildflowers for your hair, Katie."

There was a dam that had held back her emotions too long and now it was broken. He felt the sobbing that was greater than tears. He left then, knowing she needed to be alone, and as he walked away he knew that Kate had looked up and was watching him. He straightened his shoulders because she liked him that way, and he built a small tune with his lips.

Behind him, Kate Devaney looked at the broad back of the man she loved and she heard his tune. She lifted her chin and was proud and there was no fear for him now. Under her breath she said, "I'll take your wildflowers, Johnny O'Brion." She realized that she was crying, but it was the right kind of tears.

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published monthly at New York, N. Y., for October 1, 1949. State of New York, County of New York, ss.

Before me, a notary public in and for the State and county aforesaid, personally appeared Helen Meyer, who, having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that she is the Business Manager of the Zane Grey's Western Magazine and that the following is, to the best of her knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management, etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the Act of August 24, 1912, as amended by the acts of March 3, 1933, and July 2, 1946 (section 537, Postal Laws and Regulations), printed on the reverse of this form, to wit:

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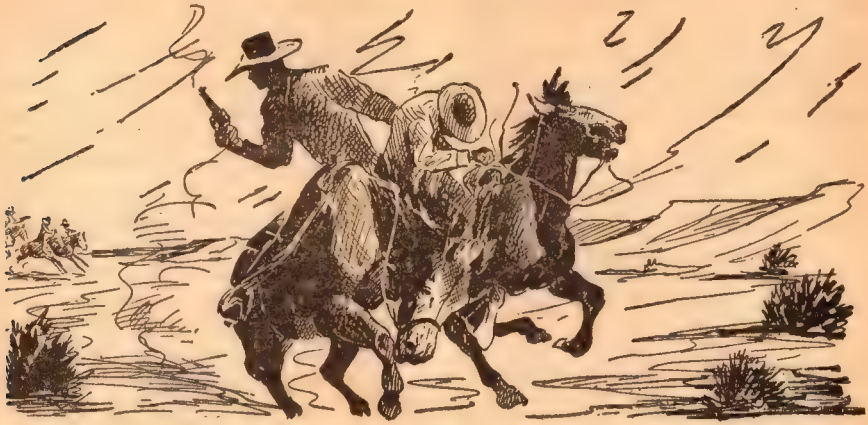
(Seal) (My commission expires March 30, 1950)

An Original ZGWM Fact Feature



ROAD AGENTS' BONANZA

By Edwin L. Sabin

WHEN, in the spring of 1876, the Cheyenne Stage Company of Gilmer & Salisbury initiated stagecoach express and passenger service into the Black Hills gold rush, it provided a new field of operations for the road agent. On this run of three hundred miles through raw country between Cheyenne and Deadwood, the weekly express or treasure coaches out of Deadwood carried consignments of dust and bullion in amounts of thousands of dollars, and the passenger coaches, too, offered pickings of fat buckskin pouches, wallets, watches, rings, and other valuables.

A lone holdup started things rolling. He was "Persimmons Bill," long-haired professional horse thief whose name had been William F. Chambers back in South Carolina, and who studied the stage schedules while hired out as a station stock tender. He then tried for easy money with a black 'kerchief mask and a brace of guns. But one day while working the road he stopped a passenger coach on which Boone May, doughty treasure-coach guard, sat incog beside the driver, hoping to get the goods on Persimmons Bill by catching him in action.

Persimmons incautiously climbed upon the right front-wheel hub to snatch at the driver's watch. May promptly lowered his left hand to the sawed-off shotgun lying meekly across his lap and "blew a window" in Persimmons.

Subsequently crew organization was effected, as had been done on the Virginia City-Salt Lake run of the Montana diggin's. On the night of March 25, 1877, the coach out of Cheyenne, with five passengers inside, one out on the box, and $15,000 in currency for a Deadwood bank, was grinding down Split-tail Gulch on the approach to Deadwood. With the sudden rise of five booted men, guns leveled, from the flanking shadows close ahead, came the sudden order:

"Halt! Throw up your hands!"

The driver, young Johnny Slaughter of Cheyenne, instinctively braked down and hoisted his arms. But as one man sprang for the bits of the lead span, Johnny kicked off the brakes and yelled "Yip!" to the team.

The heavy coach, freed from the brake blocks, rolled forward into the wheel span, the startled wheelers crowded the swing span, and the swing span pressed the leaders, already plunging to straighten out. The man missed his grab, stepped clear of the hoofs, emptied one load of buckshot into Johnny and the other into a wheeler as the team stampeded. Johnny lurched off the box, away went the team, dragging the dead wheeler, and the coach, with Walter Iler, the box passenger, hauling on the lines and the inside passengers tossed to and fro.

At a turn of the rocky trail the coach capsized, fetching the team up short in a tangle of harness. With help from the other battered passengers, Iler managed to free the horses, right the coach, and hitch up again. He drove into Deadwood about midnight.

A party of citizens set out up the gulch. They found the body of Johnny Slaughter, whose father had been mayor of Cheyenne, lying doubled over a stump beside the trail. In the morning his bloody vest was tacked against the doorway of the Deadwood stage office as an urge to action by gun and rope. Johnny himself, in spirit, traveled the trail again, with announcement of the "Johnny Slaughter" treasure coach, "flagship" christened in salute to him.

Johnny had been popular along the line. Vengeance was sworn. The Split-tail Gulch affair proved to have been largely an outside job, the work of the cowboy-outlaw Sam Bass and his companions, who had come up from Texas with a bunch of cattle for the Black Hills market and fallen in with Frank Towle, Cheyenne gambler and highwayman. The Bass party made off after the bungle that lost them coach and booty, and only Towle remained to take to the road again, with a price on his head.

Boone May, Johnny's friend, slim, dark, smooth-shaven, quiet of manner, not yet turned thirty though already highly successful in his peace-maker career, vowed to collect Towle's scalp and hounded the trail in hope. One night he and John Zimmerman, fellow treasure-coach guard, were jogging ahorse on their return to Deadwood between runs, mindful of the passenger coach on ahead.

The night air brought them sounds of a holdup being pulled off at Robbers' Roost, a little short of Hat Creek Station on the eastern border line of Wyoming. Stealing forward afoot, with eyes and ears keened, they surprised two men evidently waiting in ambush for them. Zimmerman's rifle missed in the darkness, but the buckshot from the eighteen-inch barrels of May's sawed-off ten-bore plunked home.

This spoiled the game down the road.

At the alarm shouts of the fugitive: "Look out! They got Frank—they'll be coming!" the party broke away with clatter of hoofs.

May caught at the name "Frank." Stopping off at Hat Creek to look for his victim in the morning, he found the body of the once flashy Towle in the sagebrush edging the trail and transferred the prized head to a gunny sack for delivery in Cheyenne.

Johnny Slaughter had been avenged, but a war of reprisal was on. Outlaws Jack Wadkin, Pres Webb, Harry Wisdom, Dunc Blackburn, Jack Wall, "Lame Johnny" of the enormous mouth, *et al.*, were opposed by shotgun messengers and guards Boone May, veteran Clark Stocking of California and Montana experience, debonair young Gail Hill, sturdy Scott Davis of bulldog courage, lean-jawed frontiersman Jesse Brown, the Tennessean, and the rest of that no-surrender kind, riding exposed on box and roof or in saddle, ready and willing to trade lead for lead.

The "Hands up or we'll blow the top of your head off" business took on the standard pattern: one man to cover the box, one man to tend to the lead horses, one or two to search the passenger line-up and the coach, with care for the express and mail in front and rear boots, the other men to cover the process.

The campaign to clean up the trail by bullet, buckshot, and hemp also aimed to be thorough. Boone May and Clark Stocking killed four out of seven bandits waylaying a coach at Old Woman's Fork, eastern Wyoming. Jack Wadkin, Blackburn, and Wall were hunted down. "Lame Johnny" was hanged from a tree at his favorite resort, Robbers' Roost, and planted by the side of the road under the epitaph:

Lame Johnny, Stranger, pass gently o'er this sod—if he opens his mouth, you're gone, by God!

Desperation forced a change in the pirates' methods. It was the "Johnny Slaughter" treasure coach that, one noon in September of 1878, pulled into Canyon Springs, the fourth station out of Deadwood, and drew down in front of the log barn. Big 'Gene Barnett was driver; slender, black-eyed Gail Hill, Missouri gamecock, was the shotgun messenger beside him on the box, which housed the iron-bound treasure chest containing $45,000 in Deadwood bullion; guards Scott Davis and Bill Smith, with telegraph operator Hugh Campbell of Custer, sat inside.

No sound had answered Big 'Gene's hail. Hill swung down over the wheel to unhook the team. As he reached for a trace a gun-burst from the mud chinking of the barn sent a ball through back and lungs and broke his left arm. Road agents had shut the keeper and his helper in the granary under orders of silence and had posted themselves in the barn. In this quick-action fight two bandits were killed—one by young Hill in spite of his wounds, and the other by Davis—the coach was riddled, Smith and Campbell disabled, Big 'Gene seized at gun point, Davis smoked into retreat to get help while he might, the treasure chest (guaranteed against twenty-four hours' assault) blown open and emptied, and getaway made before relief arrived.

This was rough work, to be countered by that armored type of treasure coach, "Old Ironsides," "boiler-plated," bullet-proofed with a boiler-iron lining, and loop-holed; it carried a steel express safe chained in place and was defended by a shotgun escort of four guards inside, two others riding the

trail ahead and two closing up the rear.

The run was soon transferred to the Sidney & Black Hills Trail between Deadwood and the Union-Pacific in western Nebraska. Over this rolled the dusty coaches and the yellow treasure for the mint. "Old Ironsides" came to trail's end in the Smithsonian Institute, there to recall the legends of Split-tail Gulch, Robbers' Roost, Canyon Springs, and the bullet-scarred "Johnny Slaughter."

"BY THEIR DEEDS"—A Western Quiz

"BY THEIR DEEDS you shall know them"—and here's a chance for you to test the truth of the old saying. In the left-hand column below are clues to the identities of ten famous Western gunmen whose names are listed—not in correct order, of course—in the right-hand column. See how many you can match correctly, turning to page 157 to check your answers. Six right passes you, 7-8 is good, 9 is excellent, and ten correct answers means you're a top hand in Western Americana!

1. Strung up and left to die, this Texas youth was saved when the rope parted, and he later hanged one of the vigilantes who had tried to hang him. _____Tom Horn
2. Daring the teamster with whom he was arguing to drop his gun and fight it out with fists, he promptly shot the man when the dare was taken. _____Bill Longley
3. He claimed he was looking Wes Hardin in the eye when he shot him—but the bullet he fired entered badman Wes's back. _____Ben Thompson
4. He started his "career" in New Orleans by fighting a duel with knives in a darkened room—and emerging alone. _____Sam Bass
5. When he was twelve he stabbed to death with a pocket knife a blacksmith who was beating a friend of his. _____Butch Cassidy
6. Controversy still rages as to whether his killing of three men at Rock Creek station was cold-blooded murder or justifiable homicide. _____John Slaughter
7. When a self-styled "Bad Man from Bitter Creek" tried to cut his trail herd, this future sheriff of Cochise County ended the argument with some accurate rifle fire. _____Jack Slade
8. This leader of a daring gang of bandits died in a battle in South America without ever having notched his gun. _____Billy the Kid
9. Though convicted of the crime, he stoutly asserted he had not killed Willie Nickell and many still believe he was "railroaded" to the gallows. _____John Selman
10. Immortalized in a cowboy ballad, this carefree bandit died of wounds inflicted during a bank-holdup job when the Rangers had been tipped off. _____Wild Bill Hickok

A "Paintin' Pistoleer" Yarn

Editor-in-Grief

By Walker A. Tompkins

IT'S PLUMB DOUBTFUL ifn the Paintin' Pistoleer would have ever solved the murder mystery connected with the robbery of the Wells-Fargo stage, ifn it hadn't of been for what he called the irresponsible journalism of Inky McKrimp, editor an' publisher of Stirrup County's only newspaper, the *Apache Weekly Warwhoop*. As it turned out, the Paintin' Pistoleer literally wound up in a boothill grave, all because of the reckless way this Inky McKrimp hombre slung his words around in print.

INKY MCKRIMP'S FOX-PASSES *in his "Weekly" Warwhoop, a daring Wells-Fargo robbery, and the "prevalence" of Prunella Fishman add up to a state of confusion unusual even for Apache. A ZGWM original.*

'Pache depended on almanacs for its readin' matter until Inky McKrimp showed up, a couple years back, astraddle of a jenny mule named Queen Cleopatra, draggin' a two-wheel cart which carried a case of type, a ramshackle

press, and the whisky still McKrimp had made out of a wash boiler and in which he brewed his concoction he called "Essence of Tarantular Juice."

McKrimp claimed he was a member of the "Fourth Estate," but said estate must have been mighty fourth-rate, run down, an' bankruptured. He wore a top hat without no top to it, a swallertail coat nobody ever seed him outside of asleep or awake, and he went barefoot, his oversized feet bein' impervious to rocks or cactus.

His hands was allus black and greasy, which accounted for his nickname of Inky, and when he got upwind of anybody, it was plumb oblivious that him and soap and water was teetotal strangers, temptin' folks to tack a couple more letters in front of said nickname of Inky.

Anyhow. McKrimp unhitched his mule cart out in front of the old Snodgrass Mansion on the hill above the munisipple garbage dump, and him and Queen Cleopatra perceeded to unpack and move in. The Mansion ain't been lived in to speak of since old man Snodgrass, who made the discovery strike over in the Sacatones in '72, drunk hisself to death.

First thing after he'd unpacked his possibles, McKrimp set up his whisky still on the back porch of the Mansion and started brewin' a batch of Tarantular Juice Essence. Of course this made Curly Bill Grane hoppin' mad, being in direct competition to the likker Bill retailed at his Bloated Goat Saloon, but it turned out Grane shouldn't have worried about losin' any business.

One night Curly Bill and Doc Sigmoid Grubb, the town drunkard, snuck up the hill and stole a sample of McKrimp's brew. Curly Bill had to go on a strick milk diet for six weeks, the linin' of his craw bein' eat out; and Grubb lost the fillin's out of his teeth and took the Pledge, remaining on the water wagon for nearly ten days, which established a temperance record for him that still stands.

Next thing anybody knowed, Inky McKrimp had published the first issue of the *Apache Weekly Warwhoop*, his news colyums filled with gossip furnished by his cub reporters, Hernia Groot and Samanthie Coddlewort.

As time went on, it become evident that the paper's middle name should of been spelt "Weakly," because the first year of publication it only come off the press nine times, which ain't exactly averaging the four issues a month that McKrimp guaranteed his advertisers.

McKrimp warn't too popular in Apache at first, mainly on account of the way he misspelt names, and because nobody could digest the whisky he distilled by the tubful. It got so he couldn't even give the Essense away, even to old Chief Ache-in-the-Back of the Cheery-cow Injun Reservation, who had been knowed to swig a mixture of floor varnish and writin' ink, washed down with creosote and paint remover for a chaser.

But what brung about the jam McKrimp got the Paintin' Pistoleer into, as a result of the Wells-Fargo business, was this: it seems that whenever McKrimp reported an unsolved crime in the *Weekly Warwhoop*, he allus idiotorialized to the extent of tacking on a paragraft at the end which read like this:

The guilty man is known an unlessn he gives hisself up to the law, he will be prosecuted.

The first time this type appeared in print was after an unknown hoodlum

had spiked the pink lemonade at the Apache Ladies' Knittin' & Peach Preserves Society sociable with a pint of McKrimp's Essense of Tarantular Juice. The result of this prank was that everbody who sampled the lemonade got a hangover or chronicle indigestion, and nobody had any idea who had done the fowl deed, on account of the practical jokers in town all having alibis.

But after Inky McKrimp published his paragraft about the "guilty person bein' known," be danged if Heck Coddlewort's brat Percival didn't give hisself up to Sheriff Rimfire Cudd, confessin' it was him who spiked the punchbowl at the sociable!

McKrimp's stock went up cornsiderble after that. Percival got a good lickin' where the sun never shines, and the *Warwhoop* was given credick for havin' solved a crime, by his bluff.

Roundsiding with the boys in at the Bloated Goat bar—Inky allus brung along his own likker—the editor claimed his bluff worked nine times out of ten, uncovering lots of crim'nals who otherwise would have went undetected; and he allowed he aimed to go on usin' that bluff whenever an unsolved crime was committed anywhar within reportin' distance of 'Pache.

How this bluff got the Paintin' Pistoleer in the most desprit picklement of his career was as follers: Justin Other Smith—which was the Paintin' Pistoleer's real name—got hisself a contrack to paint what he called a panorammer on the asbestos curtain over at the Bird-Cage Theater in Tombstone, which job kept him away from his studio over the Longhorn Saddle Shop for about three weeks.

When he finished his paintin' and the theater paid him $500 in legally tender dinero for the job, Justin O. buys hisself a ticket for Apache and ketches the first Wells-Fargo stage out of Tombstone. It so happent that on this run, the stage was carryin' a strongbox with $50,000 in gold aboard, which same was the pay roll for the Bonanza Syndicate paymaster over in the Sacatone diggin's. Nobody knew this but the driver, old Jehu Jobbins, and his shotgun guard, Dead-Eye Dick Pettigrew.

Justin O. was the only passenger on the stage this trip, so he set up top, usin' the strongbox for a seat, it bein' more comfortable outside the Concord while crossin' Skillet Desert.

Everything was going along monopolous and peaceful when the stage come to Never-Failing Springs, where the team was supposed to water up. Turned out the springs was bone-dry, and when the shotgun guard got out to investigate the water hole, a rifle shot blasts out and Pettigrew drops with a bullet hole where his suspenders cross.

The Paintin' Pistoleer was snoozing at the time. When he opens his eyes, it's in time to see three hossbackers come foggin' out of the near-by cottonwoods, wearin' oilskin slickers and their faces covered with bandanna masks. All three was totin' Winchester carbeens, and it didn't take Jehu Robbins long to git his arms up.

Justin O. Smith was packin' his famous .32 on a .45 frame at the time, but he knowed it would be foolish to buck this three-way drop, so he likewise reaches for a cloud.

Jehu Jobbins sings out, "You buskies drawed a blank this trip. I ain't haulin' no dinero, only the 'Pache mailbags."

Them three bandicks, they bust out guffawing at this. One of them grabs

the team, whilst the other two make shore they ain't no passengers in the coach, and then one of them clumb up to where the Paintin' Pistoleer is settin' on the strongbox.

"We happen to know," rumbles this hombre, "that you got the Bonanza Syndicate pay roll in that box. Toss it down, Smith."

The Paintin' Pistoleer's ears pert up, hearin' hisself bein' mentioned by name thisaway. It proves that one of these three owlhooters, at least, is a local character who knows him.

Smith takes aholt of the strongbox, which is plumb heavy with that $50,000 in *oro* in it, and pitches it overboard. The road agent who knows Smith pulls the kid's .32 Colt out of the holster and pitches it over into the dried-up water hole.

"Ifn we'd knowed the Paintin' Pistoleer was ridin' on yore stage," the outlaw is kind enough to admit, "we wouldn't a jumped you, Jobbins. We don't hone to tangle with the champeen pistol shot of Arizona Territory."

While he's friskin' Smith, the bandick takes over the buckskin poke which contains the $500 in frogskins that the Bird-Cage Theater had paid him for paintin' their curtain.

So far as Justin O. can reckolect, he ain't never heard this hombre's voice before. The other two badmen keep mum.

The feller who does all the talkin', he clambers down and ropes the Wells-Fargo box behint his saddle cantle. Then all three road agents fork their broncs, warnin' Jobbins to turn his stage back to the road and head for Apache pronto.

Well, as the outlaws was backin' their hosses toward the cottonwoods, Jehu Jobbins done a plumb foolhardy thing. The old man reaches in the jockey box under his seat and comes up with an old cap-and-ball Dragoon .44.

When Jobbins yanks trigger, that smokepole roars like a stick of dynamite, and lo and be-gosh ifn the owlhooter who's got the Wells-Fargo box tied to his saddle don't spill out of his stirrups, his noggin drilled from ear to ear!

The dead man's hoss goes stampedin' out into the brush with stirrups flappin', whilst the two jaspers on hossback turn their carbeens on Jobbins and work him over with .30-30 slugs.

Them robbers are plumb sore over their pardner gittin' kilt, and although Justin O. has been a good boy up to now, they start shootin' at him, aimin' to cut him off at the pockets.

With slugs whinin' around his head like hornets on the prod, the Paintin' Pistoleer does a graceful swan-dive offn that Concord and lands with his legs windmillin'. He jumps into Never-Failin' Springs and picks up his .32 Colt on a .45 frame.

It's plumb long range for a .32, but Smith wings one of the road agents, makin' him drap his rifle. The 'tother one, seein' that he's buckin' the famous Paintin' Pistoleer, he pulls his hoss around and vamooses like the devil was after him with a red-hot pitchfork, follered by his wounded pard.

Justin O. Smith scrambles out of the water hole and heads for a near-by knob of high ground, reloadin' as he went. But by the time he got there, he sees that the stage robbers are high-tailin' it toward the Mexican border.

Smith sashays back to where the dead bandick is layin'. He recovers his poke with the $500 in it, and then has himself a peek at the face under the corpse's bandanna mask.

"Big-Nose Birdwaller!" the Paintin' Pistoleer says, recognizin' this hombre Jehu Jobbins has kilt. Big-Nose Birdwaller bein' a jackleg mucker from the Sacatone diggins', and who Smith has seen drinkin' at the Bloated Goat.

Well, Smith loads Dead-Eye Dick Pettigrew into the stage. He decides he'll haul Big-Nose Birdwaller to town as well, to turn the evidence over to Sheriff Rimfire Cudd and coroner Grubb.

It's after sundown when the Paintin' Pistoleer tools the Wells-Fargo coach into 'Pache. The Bonanza Syndicate paymaster is waitin' at the station with his guards, to pick up the box of dinero, and he's fitten to be tied when he finds out it's been stole.

Rimfire Cudd takes a gander at Big-Nose Birdwaller, and tells the mine paymaster that most likely the other two robbers was miners too, who knew when the pay roll was due.

"More'n likely I'll know who the culprits is," the Bonanza paymaster agrees, "when three of our muckers fail to show up for work *mañana*. But that don't recover the company's $50,000."

Sigmoid Grubb, the coroner, he holds an inquest over Big-Nose's remains, and the jury returns a verdick that Birdwaller died of lead pizen administered by the late Jehu Jobbins in line of duty. And that very night, Birdwaller is buried over in the Apache boothill, complete with his mask, slicker, guns, and boots.

Seein' as how this holdup occurred in Stirrup County, Rimfire Cudd has to organize a posse and investigate. Justin O. leads the posse over to Never-Failing Springs, but they don't turn up no clues, the killers' gitaway tracks havin' been wiped out by a herd of sheep run by Rimfire Cudd's half-wit brother, Chewie, midway to the Sacatone foothills.

This is such a big scoop that Inky McKrimp runs off what he calls an "Extry Edition," although to be frank the *Weekly Warwhoop* has been overdue for nearly two months nohow.

McKrimp's write-up of the robbery is fairly accurate, for him, but the Paintin' Pistoleer like to blowed his cork when he reads the final paragraft of McKrimp's story:

. . . the $50,000 loot is still missing, but Justin Other Smith says the guilty men are known, and unlessn they give theirselves up to the law, they will be prosecuted.

Justin O. is madder'n a wet sagehen when he takes a pasear up to McKrimp's editorial orifices in the Snodgrass Mansion, and brandishes the latest *Warwhoop* under Inky's nose.

"What in tarnation is the idea of printin' that infernal lie about me knowin' who them robbers were, Inky?" Smith bellers, half a mind to grab an ax and smash McKrimp's printin' machinery. "If those stage bandits read this story, they'll think I spotted them under their disguises and they'll come after me. You fixin' to git me dry-gulched from ambush?"

Inky has got on the outside of a fifth of his raw Essense of Tarantular Juice, so he don't take offense at Smith's ire.

"Unruffle yore feathers, friend Justin," McKrimp says, sweet as blackstrap molasses, while he feeds his jenny mule Queen Cleopatra some Essense out of a spoon. "I was bluffin', nacheral. But you saw how my bluff paid off onct before. Ifn I can skeer them road agents into surrenderin' to the law, I'll split the thousand-dollar re-ward the express company has posted for their capture."

But Smith don't appreciate Inky's

generosity a-tall. As the only livin' survivor of the stage holdup, he knows he'll be marked for bushwhack bait ifn this copy of the *Weekly Warwhoop* falls into the hands of Big-Nose Birdwaller's pardners.

Next day Bonanza Syndicate sends a wire to Lew Pirtle's Overland Telegraph office to the effect that nobody except Big-Nose Birdwaller failed to report for work at the diggin's. As time passes, Inky McKrimp is forced to admit his bluff won't work for murder and highway-robbery cases, only for petty larson and practical jokes and the like of that there.

The Paintin' Pistoleer is beginning to sleep better of nights when along comes a piece of sensational news which makes Apache fergit all about the Wells-Fargo killings.

It turns out that Sol Fishman, who runs the O. K. Mercantile and who eloped with Miss Prunella Peebles a year ago, is going to become a father come February!

This news was supposed to be kept quiet between Prunella and Sol, but Dr. Sigmoid Grubb, who had been tooken into consultation regarding Prunella's approaching motherhood, got in his cups that night at the Bloated Goat and makes the slip of corngratulating Sol in public concerning his paternity.

You could have bowled over Apache folks with a toothpick. But Sol don't take offense at the secret bein' let out. Facts is, he's bustin' with pride, and sets up the house to a round of Blue Bagpipe, Curly Bill's most expensive Scotch.

"I'm goin' to name the little critter Moe," Sol chortles. And he gets so worked up with his braggin', he forgets he can get tobacco wholesale at his own O. K. Mercantile, and orders a dozen boxes of nickel stogies from Curly Bill Grane to pass around to his well-wishers.

O' course old Sol gits plenty of joshin' and ribbin' over the stork's date at the Fishman residunce, which makes Sol so pleased and flattered that his struttin' makes Lew Pirtle disgusted and Lew stalks out of the saloon in a huff.

"Lew's jelly of me," Sol Fishman cackles. "He's the father of the biggest fambly in town, to date, and he cain't stand competition, is what it b'iles down to."

Sol is nine-tenth's plastered by now, like everybody else in the barroom, but his vision is good enough for him to spot editor Inky McKrimp ridin' through the batwings astride his jenny mule. Sol runs over and begs the editor to print a special edition of the *Warwhoop*, so as to spread the glad tidings of his prospective parenthood over the whole county.

McKrimp, who is a mite hard up for news as usual, he agrees to give little Moe a good batch of welcoming wordage, if and pervidin' Prunella agrees to this prior publicity.

Turns out Prunelly has already told all the members of the Knittin' & Peach Preserves Society nohow, each one sworn to strick secrecy, of course. The womenfolks, they tell each other the gossip in the strickest confidunce, but make each other swear under oath to keep it under their bonnets.

So it goes without saying that the *Weekly Warwhoop* got Missus Fishman's permission to publish the news of their coming blessed event, even this fer in advance of Moe's deadline.

In honor of such a happy occasion, the Paintin' Pistoleer fergits his worries about the stage bandicks looking him up on some dark night, and turns

down his nightcap swig of buttermilk for a shot of Blue Bagpipe—several shots, in fact—to drink a toast to the coming Moe Fishman.

As a result of this celebratin', Justin O. is feelin' perty frisky when he leaves the Bloated Goat Saloon and staggers upstairs to his art studio over the Longhorn Saddle Shop, around midnight.

Smith lights his lamp, aimin' to work late on a paintin' of an Oregon Trail covered wagon train he's making for a cowboy bootery in Coffeyville, Kansas, when he discovers he has got a couple of tough-looking visitors waiting for him in the dark. Likewise, his studio looks like a tornado has struck it while he was over at the Bloated Goat helping Sol celebrate.

These visitors he recognizes as Tom Tolliver and Soapy O'Krapp, buckaroos who rent their lass'-ropes to the Lazy H ranch in the north end of the county, and who have played stud poker with Smith many's the time.

When Smith says "Howdy" in a kind of high-pitched giggle, so stewed he's actually glad to see these cowboys in spite of the shambles they've made of his workshop, neither Tolliver nor O'Krapp so much as crack a smile.

Tolliver hands Smith a copy of the latest *Weekly Warwhoop*, and p'ints to McKrimp's story of the stage robbery. Tolliver has drawed a ring with a soft-nose bullet around the bottom end of this news item.

"Accordin' to this noosepaper piece," Tolliver growls like a she-bear, "you know who held up Jobbins's stage, Smith."

The Paintin' Pistoleer just titters foolish-like.

"Wisht I (hic!) did," he slobbers, "but I (hic!) don't. You see, these bandicks were wearin' slickers an' bandanna masks. (Hic!) McKrimp was bluffin' when he (hic!) wrote that about the guilty par—(hic!)—ties bein' knowed by me and would be pros—(hic!)—secuted."

"Yeah?" sneers Soapy O'Krapp. "Waal, Tom and me couldn't take a chanct on that noosepaper story bein' a bluff, Smith. It so happens it was Tom an' me who was workin' with Big-Nose Birdwaller on that job over at Never-Failin' Springs, savvy?"

With which Soapy O'Krapp draws a big six-shooter and cocks it in a businesslike manner. Starin' into the shootin' end of that hogleg, Justin O. Smith is shocked cold sober in a hurry.

"Why are you confessin' to me, Soapy?" Smith moans. "If you'd kept your big mouth shut tonight, I'd never have suspected it was you and Tolliver who helped rob that stage."

Tolliver sidles around behind Smith and frisks him to make sure he ain't totin' his .32 Colt. But Smith ain't heeled; the pistol is hangin' in plain sight on a nail at the far end of the room.

For the first time, Justin O. realizes that Tolliver's elbow has got a fat bandage under the sleeve. That proves Tolliver was the masked rider that Smith nipped with a bullet before they vamoosed out of range over at the desert water hole last week.

"The deal is this, Smith," Soapy O'Krapp goes on to say. "When the stallion we loant to Big-Nose showed up at the Lazy H corral the day after the holdup, that Wells-Fargo box was missin' from ahint the saddle. Tolliver and me are plumb curious to know what happened to that express box. And *you* are goin' to tell us."

Smith gulps as loud as a rock bein' dropped into a deep well when O'Krapp

tickles his wishbone with the muzzle of his Colt, to sort of refresh his memory of events.

"Yeah," echoes Tolliver, fiddlin' with his gun. "You're the only man who come out of that holdup alive, Smith. We know Big-Nose's hoss didn't drift very far after we skedaddled. We figger you glommed onto that Wells-Fargo *oro*. It's a cinch Bonanza ain't recovered it yet, and Wells-Fargo is advertisin' a re-ward for the return of said strongbox. What's the answer?"

Smith, he harrows his brains for somethin' to add to this discussion before its gits too one-sided. He knows if he as much as lets out a squeak for help, these cowhands will salivate him on the spot. They've seen his pistol hangin' on the wall by now, so he can't edge over thataway after his .32.

"Boys," the Paintin' Pistoleer says finally, "I might as well come clean. You're right. I figgered I might as well ride herd on that strongbox, seein' as how nobody would ever suspect *me* of dabbin' my loop on your plunder."

"We done searched yore studio thorough," Soapy says, "and the box ain't here. Where'd you cache it?"

Smith grins. "Right under the noses of the whole town," he confesses. "When Sigmoid Grubb put Birdwaller in his coffin, I got my brilliant idea. I sneaked out to where I'd hid the Wells-Fargo box comin' into town, pried off the lock, and took out them bags of gold pieces. When nobody was around I snuck into Grubb's morgue and hid the bags in Big-Nose's coffin, savvy? The pallbearers thought Birdwaller was a mite hefty for his size, but they buried him quick before he could gain any more weight."

Soapy O'Krapp prods Smith's backside with his six-gun.

"I think you're lyin' to git out of a jam," he says, "but there's one quick way to find out. We're goin' over to boothill and dig up Big-Nose, Smith. And if that dinero ain't buried with him, you dang soon will be."

Nobody seen the two Lazy H cowpokes hazin' Smith out of the Longhorn Saddle Shop. Smith picks up a shovel and all three of 'em sashay over to boothill.

Smith leads Tolliver and O'Krapp over to Birdwaller's grave and says, "I know you aim to shoot me no-how, so I'd be obliged if you' git it over with right now, boys."

Tolliver shakes his head. "We ain't cashin' in yore chips until that gold is in our claws, Justin O. Don't rush us."

Smith tosses his shovel onto the grave mound. "Then start diggin'," he says, "and get the suspense over with."

Soapy O'Krapp shakes his head. "Uh-uh. Diggin' in this 'dobe soil is hard work, son. You dig. And don't make any false moves with that shovel, or I'll bend this gun over yore noggin."

Well, the Paintin' Pistoleer starts a-diggin', his whole past life swimmin' afore his eyes. This adobe ain't had time to really set yet, but he's well nigh tuckered out before he's five foot down and his shovel is knockin' on Birdwaller's coffin.

Tolliver and O'Krapp keep their guns handy, hunkered down alongside the open grave, watchin' Smith's moves like a hawk.

The Paintin' Pistoleer wants to rest, but they make him keep workin'. He digs around the lid of the coffin until he can pry it off, and there he is, straddlin' the box with Big-Nose Birdwaller exposed to the elements agin. It's black as the inside of a goat's gullet down

in that grave, which Smith is thankful for, him not especially hankering to look at the dead hombre whose privacy he has been forced to disturb in this disgraceful fashion.

"All right," Smith says in short pants, "I'll toss out these bags of dinero. The whole fifty thousand is here. I'd planned to wait a couple years and then dig up this gold for myself."

Tolliver and Soapy do a little jig, knowin' they're about to become filthy rich. They see Smith hunker down, gropin' his hands inside Big-Nose's coffin.

"We'll bash in Smith's head and leave him in this open grave," Soapy says to Tom. "That'll set the town talkin', won't it?"

Well, the Paintin' Pistoleer straightens up, just his head showin' above the rim of the open grave. He brings his arms up out of the darkness, and the two robbers see then and there he ain't liftin' no bags of Wells-Fargo loot. No, sir!

Smith's packin' the two loaded .45 Colts which he knowed Big-Nose has been interred with as was the local custom where killers was concerned.

Before Tolliver or O'Krapp could lift their own guns, Smith yanks both triggers simultaneous. His left-hand gun tore the .45 out of Tolliver's fist, taking a trigger finger with it. His right-hand gun drove a slug clean through Soapy O'Krapp's shoulder.

Flabbergasted by this disappointment, Tom and Soapy didn't offer no strenuous objections to the Paintin' Pistoleer h'istin' hisself out of Birdwaller's profaned resting-place. Wasn't long until Smith had marched these tough cases over to the 'Pache jail and had turned 'em over to Sheriff Rimfire Cudd for safekeeping.

That night Lew Pirtle wires Wells-Fargo in Tombstone, and next day the express company sent scouts out into Skillet Desert. Shore enough, they located the missin' box of gold in a draw near Chewie Cudd's sheep camp, where Big-Nose's stampedin' bronc had bucked it offn the saddle. The $50,000 was intacked.

In Apache, it was hard to tell which was the biggest hero, the Paintin' Pistoleer or Inky McKrimp. Because the latter's worst enemies had to admit that the editor of the *Weekly Warwhoop* had been responsible for bluffin' Tolliver and O'Krapp into the open. This business shoved Sol Fishman and his comin' baby out of the limelight in a hurry.

McKrimp gets out another Extry Edition, tellin' how the Paintin' Pistoleer had captured the robbers singlehanded, thanks to the *Warwhoop's* adroit reportin', and how Wells-Fargo got its missing gold shipment back O.K.

The night of the day the paper come out, McKrimp rid his jenny mule into the Bloated Goat bar, hitched Queen Cleopatra to the brass rail, and started swilling down his homemade Tarantalar Juice Essense, using Blue Bagpipe for a chaser, on the house.

"It's taken a long time to win the grudgin' approval of this mangy cowtown," the bad-smellin' editor brags, scratching a match on his bare heel and lighting up a two-bit cheroot which Jim Groot the banker has give him. "It's a nice warm feelin', knowing I'm well-liked and respected for my journalistic accomplishments. Yessir, I reckon my worries is over at last. I've done proved the power of the press. I may even increase my subscription rates. I've—"

Just then the batwings slam open and old Sol Fishman comes stompin' in, accompanied by the local justice of the peaces, Plato X. Scrounge. Fishman is wavin' a copy of today's *Weekly Warwhoop*, with which he wallops pore old Inky McKrimp right over the dome, squashin' his silk topper like an accordeen.

"I've engaged Lawyer Scrounge to sue you for scandal an' liable and everything else in the statue books for that story you writ about Prunelly an' little Moe," bellers Sol Fishman, hauling off and giving Inky a stomp on the bare toes. "First off, though, I'm goin' to mop this barroom floor with yore unwashed carcass, you scandal-mongerin' yeller journalist!"

Well, Inky makes haste to slip Queen Cleopatra's bridle and hops aboard his trusty mule, puttin' her through the nearest window, glass to the contrary notwithstandin'. Sol Fishman and Plato X. Scrounge are right after him, hammer and tongues.

Inky larrups the jenny out into the mesquites. Border-bound, hollerin' bloody murder. Sol Fishman is gainin' on Queen Cleopatra at every hop, in spite of Sol being past seventy and stove up with the rheumatiz besides.

"I don't savvy what got into old Sol," speaks up Curly Bill Grane, scratching his head with a bungstarter. "Never seed the old incomepooper so riled up over anything before. Hell, you all heard him beggin' the editor to write up the comin' of little Moe. Inky was plumb keerful to git Missus Fishman's O. K. to announce her bein' prevalent. For onct, I'm halfway sorry for that little McKrimp varmint, dogged if I ain't."

Justin Other Smith stoops down to pick up the copy of the *Warwhoop* which Sol had lambasted McKrimp with.

After a minute the Paintin' Pistoleer comments in that soft Alabama drawl of hisn, "I think that old Sol has reasonable grounds for being aggravated in this case. McKrimp got some of last week's type mixed up with the birth announcement. Listen to what McKrimp printed:

Apache residunts are corngratulating Missus Solomon Fishman upon the anticipated arrival of a sun & heir to be christened Moe. The guilty man is known, and unlessn he gives hisself up to the law, he will be prosecuted."

If you have enjoyed "Editor-in-Grief," you will want to own THE PAINTIN' PISTOLEER, Dell Book No. 300, which includes the first dozen of Walker A. Tompkins's rollicking yarns about Justin Other Smith. Get it at your newsstand, or order by title and number from Dell Publishing Co., 261 Fifth Ave., New York 16, N. Y., price 25¢ postpaid, and have fun reading:

"Innocents Abroad in Los Scandalous"
"Rain, Rain, Come to Stay"
"The Horseless Head Man"
"Hell-Bent for Election!"
"Here's Mud in Yore Eye"
"Blood's Thicker Than Watermelon"
"Monkey See, Monkey Do"
"Go West, Young Woman!"
"Cupid Can Be Stupid"
"Object Matri-Money"
"Souse of the Border"
"Tattoo or Not Tattoo"

SILVER *for* OLD ABE

By Tom W. Blackburn

CHAPTER ONE

Strike in the Dark

THE FERRY was an ingenious device, a typical, practical makeshift of the frontier. Lee Denton had spent half a day in meticulous study of its mechanics, digesting them as thoroughly as he had the topography of both approaches to the turbulent Sink River and the current and course of the stream, itself. This was a business in which a man would not have two chances. The country behind had been too open; the country ahead was too densely wooded and there was too much chance of sudden reinforcements for the military convoy with the pair of heavily lashed, unmarked wagons.

Cosgrove and Murchison, with the extra horses and the Indian guide, were downstream on the near bank, waiting for their part in this bold strike. Kettleman had already showed his light on the far bank, stirring alarm in the military convoy now bunched at the near landing of the ferry. Because the idea had been his and he had made the contacts and because he was to draw the biggest share of the handsome fee for this job, Denton had reserved the most difficult part of the business for himself.

Already thoroughly chilled by his knee-deep wait in the frigid water, he began wading cautiously out into the current. The creak of a windlass sounded below him and the bulky ferry barge pulled away from the bank he was just quitting himself. Kettleman's light, as he had planned, had so disturbed the young officer in charge of the convoy that he was now sending the main body of his party across on the first trip of the barge to reconnoiter. The silhouettes of mounted cavalrymen crowded the barge deck. Apparently only four troopers were left behind to cross with the drivers and the wagons on the second trip.

Denton fastened his eyes on the thick tree which served as an anchor for the opposite end of the ferry cable and moved toward it. He would not have to swim, even in mid-channel, unless he lost his footing—he had checked this, also—but he would have shoulder-deep going and to negotiate the center of the channel soundlessly would be difficult at best.

The anchor cable of the ferry was stretched across the river with sufficient slack to be led through a sheave at one end of the barge, looped in half a dozen turns about a crude windlass amidships, and out through another sheave at the other end of the clumsy craft. By working the windlass, the ferry could be dragged in either direction across the stream. The force of the current was transmitted to the anchors ashore at either end of the cable and did not bear on the winch, itself, which lacked the leverage to withstand the downstream pull of the swift river against the clumsy barge, should the

TWO WAGONLOADS of Comstock bullion destined for the Union treasury are hijacked on the desert and to recapture them the young lieutenant finds himself forced to rely on a man who acknowledges allegiance to neither North nor South! A ZGWM original novelette.

cable part. This inability of the windlass to do any more than barely drag the ferry across broadside to the current was the essence of Denton's plan. He grinned at its success thus far.

Water crept paralyzingly up his ribs. He lifted his rifle higher. A midstream ripple splashed over the crown of his shoulders. Then the bottom began to shoal toward the farther bank. The barge landed just ahead of him. The cavalry troop aboard it scrambled ashore and spread through the brush, hunting cautiously for the source of the light Kettleman had shown to bait them here. Two men remained aboard and started cranking the ferry back across the river.

Denton made the last thirty yards of his own crossing with increased caution, finally slipping into the willows under the bank where he had a clear overhead view of the spliced knot which fastened the weathered hemp cable to its anchor tree on this side of the river. Crouching close to the surface of the water, he waited. Sound came across the river as the barge

landed and took on the two waiting wagons. Presently the windlass began to creak again.

From his position, Denton could not see the recrossing of the barge and was forced to gauge its position by the degree of downstream bow forced into the cable above him by the pressure of the current against the barge. When he believed this to be at maximum, indicating the ferry had made half of the return crossing, he quietly levered a shell into his carbine, rested the barrel on a willow fork above him, and shifted until he had the cable in the vee of his sights.

Fiber flew from the cable at his first shot and startled queries rang out on the bank above him. Men started threshing through the brush. Denton swore, steadied himself, and fired again. He had hoped one shot would be sufficient. It appeared two wouldn't be. The cable was badly torn after the second shot, with seemingly only a few strands intact, but for a long and agonizing moment it continued to withstand the powerful strain bearing against it. Then, with a sound as explosive as that of a third shot, the cable parted.

Thrusting his carbine ruinously deep into the mud of the bank before him, Denton turned and launched himself in a flat dive as the first of the soldiers on the bank reached a place directly above the shallows where he had been crouching. They fired at the splash of his dive. Beneath the surface he could feel the impact of heavy rifle balls against the water. But he had calculated this, too, and he kept to the bottom as he swam frantically outward.

When bursting lungs would let him remain under no longer, he surfaced for air and dived again before he was sighted. He did this twice more before risking remaining on the surface. Shaking the wet hair from his eyes, he saw everything was still following the pattern of his plan. The barge, swinging on the yet anchored end of the parted cable, was drifting downstream with increasing swiftness. And the half dozen men aboard it were helpless. In a few moments it would be pulled up by the anchored end of the cable, at least until the hemp had been jerked from the windlass on its deck. But before this happened, Lee Denton had one other job to do.

He swam with powerful strokes, locating the cable trailing behind the ferry by swimming into it at full speed, bruising his lips and face against its coarseness. With the awkwardness of all underwater movement, he jerked his belt knife and sawed at the hemp. Because of the strain imposed by its own drag, each strand parted explosively. When the last went, the end of the cable attached to the drifting barge was nearly jerked loose from his clinging hand. He gripped it tightly and let the helpless craft ahead tow him downstream.

On the east bank of the river a detachment of Union cavalry, separated from its regular command for what was intended to be one of the most spectacular operations of the war, milled helplessly. They no longer had a treasure to convoy eastward to fatten the Union treasury and win fame for themselves. And downstream, at a carefully chosen point, the balance of Denton's party was waiting for him to float down to them with two incredible wagonloads of silver bullion from the inexhaustible mines of Nevada's roaring Comstock Lode.

Chapter Two

Double-Crossed

CUT loose while it was in midstream, the ferry barge continued to drift in the main channel. Half a mile downstream, two of the men aboard it leaped overboard and struck out for the nearest shore. Denton grinned inwardly. These would be the civilian skinners who had been driving the wagons, wanting no part in a puzzling affair like this and no share of a soldier's troubles. The four troopers on the barge, however, seemed to realize some kind of a trap had been sprung. They had forted themselves up between the two wagons as though they intended to be stubborn.

The officer in command of the cavalry detachment marooned on the east bank of the swift Sink had lost his head sufficiently to issue the obvious order, as Denton had hoped he might do. His troop was pounding along the east bank, keeping abreast of the barge, rather than trying to recross the river. And because they had not studied this country beforehand, they didn't realize that the only practical place even to swim the Sink was at the ferry they were leaving behind them. The east bank was slowly rising. In a little it would become an interminable series of ragged sandstone cliffs down which no man or horse could climb even to reach the water.

Time passed swiftly. Because of the numbness in his body and a rising chop kicked up on the surface of the river by its increasing current, Denton heard but imperfectly the hail of warning Cosgrove shouted to the four troopers on the barge from a place ashore nearly five miles below the ferry. This didn't trouble Denton. It had all been so carefully rehearsed beforehand that he knew the words of the hail and their inevitable result.

A few moments after Cosgrove's shout and as though steered by a rudder in Lee Denton's hand, the barge failed to take a sharp turn in the course of the river, struck a sandbar jutting out from the west bank, and swung sharply in against the shore. Denton found shoals beneath his own feet and scrambled stiffly for the bank.

At two widely divergent angles from which they could completely cover the barge deck, Murchison and Cosgrove fired a pair of warning shots over the heads of the stubborn troopers forted up between the wagons. A part of a soldier's business was to measure odds against him. Veterans sufficiently regarded to have been trusted with this assignment would have been able to read the inflexible warning in those shots. However, the men on the barge were defending more than their lives. The wagons towering above them contained Union silver, desperately needed. They answered Murchison and Cosgrove with grim barking of carbines.

Denton's two men had their orders. Forted securely ashore, they went efficiently to work. By the time Denton had dragged himself up the bank a hundred yards upstream of their position it was all over, with hardly more than a dozen rounds fired.

Denton stood in the sparse growth above the water, feeling the chill bite of a Nevada desert's night air through his wet clothing, trying to stamp circulation back into cramped muscles while he watched the upstream surface of the river for some sign of Kettle-

man. The man's orders had been to recross the river after showing his light on the opposite bank and float with the current down to rendezvous here. Denton could see nothing, but he wasn't concerned. This had gone smoothly enough and Kettleman was a good man.

From the cliffs across the river, the officer in command of the marooned convoy detachment had desperately dismounted his men and they were pouring a wholly useless barrage of rifle fire across a quarter mile of emptiness, cheated even of the hope of freak accuracy by the darkness which was coming with the setting of the moon.

Denton figured the rest of it in his head. With the extra horses it would take half an hour to get the wagons ashore and ready to roll. By daylight they'd be far down on the malpais to the south, where even heavily loaded wagons would leave no mark of passage on the flinty volcanic stone. Rendezvous with Captain Hale's hidden bunch of irregular Texas rebels was but a leisurely two days away. And Hale had promised a good slice of the fortune they contained to the man who could divert these wagons to him and to the rebel cause.

Pursing his lips to whistle once in signal to Murchison and Cosgrove, Denton started stiffly toward them, thinking of the whisky in his duffel roll on one of the waiting horses. His first inkling of something wrong was the presence of four silhouettes on the riverbank instead of three—Cosgrove, Murchison, the Indian guide—and Sam Kettleman.

Sam had not followed orders, then. He must have come down the east bank a little way after showing his light, hit the water, and swimming back across, traveled down the west bank of the stream. After the meticulous rehearsals, repeated time and again, Sam could not have misunderstood his instructions. This had been deliberate disobedience. Denton broke into a stiff half-trot toward the little group on the riverbank.

Jim Cosgrove said something softly to the others. Ed Murchison coolly unbelted his gun and rammed it warningly into the belly of the startled Indian guide. It was Sam Kettleman who turned toward Denton, his gun also clear. The weapon came up calmly, lining at Lee. He understood, then. Kettleman and Cosgrove and Murchison, with the help of the Indian, intended to drive these two wagons of Comstock silver southward, all right, but not to rendezvous with Captain Hale and his rebels. They had already had a part in cheating the Union Treasury of this rolling fortune; now they would cheat the Confederacy, also. And they would take no chances with Lee Denton.

Helplessly watching Sam Kettleman's upward-swinging gun, Denton thought for an instant about the war being so grimly fought in the east and the curious part he had undertaken to play in it. The bonanza kings of the fabulous Comstock, accustomed to buying anything they wanted with the revenue from their mines under Sun Mountain, wanted statehood for Nevada. Like most of the great emptiness of the West, involved in its own struggle for survival against the ruggedness of the frontier, this desert territory had no real stake in the struggle which had split the older part of the country. This secret shipment of silver bullion was actually a bland bid by the Comstock giants to buy Nevada's statehood far more than it was

real evidence of loyalty to the Union.

As a consequence, Lee Denton, who was of neither the North or the South, but of the West, had felt no moral guilt in accepting the generous offer of the Confederate agent at Virginia City. Jeff Davis needed silver as badly as Abe Lincoln. In either hands it would go to the same use—prosecution of a war in which Lee Denton had no part. He had cheated the young Union lieutenant who had been tricked into marooning himself on the wrong bank of the Sink. Now Denton was to be tricked himself.

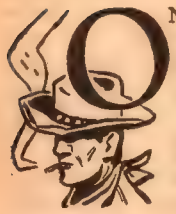
Denton shouted at Kettleman in the last big bluff of which every man west of the Missouri always seemed capable —an order with the full sound of authority behind it, as though he was yet in full control of the situation and the words themselves could turn away a bullet.

"Sam, you can't do it!"

Sam Kettleman grinned. The grin vanished behind the bright muzzle flash of his gun. Denton heard no sound. He was jolted sharply. The darkness was pierced by a tremendous flash of light which left greater blackness behind it. And the hard earth tilted upward to strike him in the face.

Chapter Three

"Get Me a Saddle!"



ONCE, when he was ten years old, Lieutenant Johnny Farrell had stolen his father's rifle to hunt in the berry bottoms of their Missouri homestead. The rifle felt unfamiliar in his hands but a boy's confidence made him walk lightly and carry it easily. The bear had looked huge, at first, but it had shrunk over the sights of the rifle. He had been sure just where the ball would strike and how the bear would fall. When the ball merely gouged the animal's shoulder, a strange kind of terror seized him.

He had practiced swabbing and reloading, out behind the barn, until he was nearly as fast as his father. But the rearing monster twenty paces away ceased to be merely a piece of game he wanted to take home. He forgot his practice and skill. The ordered processes of his mind fell into a shambles of mixed impulses. It was not fear so much as indecision which made him turn and run. When he got hold of himself and looked back, the bear had also run, in the opposite direction, and he had committed the cardinal sin of the frontier—losing wounded game.

Sitting in his wet saddle on the west bank of the Sink River in the thin light of dawn, looking down at the bodies of the four troopers who had attempted to cross the Sink with the precious wagons under his care, he remembered the boyhood incident of the bear. Here again he had committed a sin of judgment caused by mixed impulses and indecision in a moment of tension. His confidence as a competent officer was badly shaken. Whoever had formulated the plan for the strike here at the Sink had been clever and shrewd. Johnny Farrell knew that he would now have to face the censure of his own men and the end of a promising military career in the middle of a war which demanded the best service he and his kind could produce.

He stared at the dead troopers and the tracks of the wagons which had disappeared with such fixity that Sergeant Whirter had to call his name

twice.. His attention arrested, he reined about and rode through the brush to the little open patch where Whirter stood. Another body lay there. For a moment Farrell thought this man was also dead. A widely gashed head wound had come within an ace of taking his life, but he yet breathed and was struggling toward consciousness.

"Remember that last gun-flash across the river last night?" Whirter asked. "I thought they had trouble among themselves! Reckon we better finish the chore this gent's partners started on him—"

Whirter drew his revolver. Most of the troop had moved up behind Farrell, the grim set of their features seconding Whirter. This man on the ground had been one of those who had ruthlessly killed four of their fellows. By the harsh code of military men who had known much thankless service along the frontier, it was logical that the wounded man die.

Farrell felt the same grimness and practicality, but the indecision which had cost him his convoy was gone. When a man made a mistake, he was obliged to repair it as best he could. There was malpais to the south, on which no passing vehicle would leave a track. This wounded thief was the detachment's sole link with the stolen wagons. He gripped Whirter's arm.

"You better re-read the Articles, Sergeant," he said firmly. "We're obliged to protect prisoners, not kill them! Get a shelter-half rigged over this man and have the medical kit brought up."

In uniform or out, frontier service was an equalizer of men. Whirter, with twenty years of seniority, made grudging recognition of the rank between them.

"I'd like leave to say something, Lieutenant."

Johnny Farrell knew his men and his dependence upon them too well to refuse. He nodded curt permission.

"We've got to get those wagons back," the veteran growled. "We can't track them. The devils were too smart for that. Tricking us onto the wrong side of the river gave them a big start. Our best chance now is to cut back and forth on the malpais to the south till we hit some sign of them. We'll have to ride ten miles for every mile they travel, and it'll have to be light and fast. This murdering son couldn't stand an hour of it if we hauled him along. We'll have to leave him, and it's better to leave him dead than alive—and kinder—in this damned country!"

Others in the troop growled approval. Farrell's lips flattened.

"Bring up the shelter-half and the medical kit, Sergeant. If this man can talk, he may save us the ride you propose. We'll risk time to try bringing him around."

Whirter's face darkened angrily, but he passed orders along. While the shelter was being staked, Farrell took a cake of caustic soap to the river and painstakingly scrubbed his hands and nails and filled a collapsible basin with water. Hunkering down beside the wounded man, he commenced to clean the man's wound.

Whirter and the others watched sullenly for a moment, but when their disapproval failed to sway him, they turned away. Whirter issued a pair of shovels from a supply pack and the party commenced opening a grave in the riverbank for the four dead troopers.

Johnny Farrell studied his prisoner as he worked. The West was slowly filling with this kind. A medium body, well knit and incredibly hardened by

the rigors of the life he led. A good head; strong, blunt features. Farmer or merchant or clerk or sailor, driven restlessly from familiar surroundings to find what he desired in the vast loneliness between the Rocky Mountains and the Pacific. The fellow had certainly been in Virginia City when the federal silver convoy had unobtrusively rolled down Sun Mountain on the beginning of its eastward trek. But there was nothing in face or dress to identify him. There had been a thousand like him on the streets of the bonanza camp during the ten days Johnny Farrell had waited for the bullion to be assembled and packed for shipment.

The man's wound was serious. Farrell, who had seen a soldier's share of wounds, was a little sickened by it. The scalp had been badly torn from a point just back of the eye along one entire side of the head. It was difficult to tell whether there had been any bone injury to the skull or not, although Farrell thought it likely. At best he could only cleanse the wound, treat it against mortification with peroxide, and clumsily stitch it closed with the linen sutures provided in the medical kit.

He didn't know just when the prisoner regained consciousness. Sometime before the suturing. But the man made no protest beyond an occasional quiver in his limp body at the necessary brutality of Farrell's ministrations. When the bandage was in place, the man's eyes opened. Pain swam in their dark depths, but his speech was clear.

"How many men do you have, Lieutenant?"

"A dozen."

"Good horses?"

"Most of them," Johnny agreed.

The man sat up with painful effort. "Denton's my name, Lieutenant," he said. "I was boss of the bunch that jumped you back at the ford. Get me a saddle. We got a hell of a ride ahead of us!"

"You think you can track those wagons across the malpais?"

"No," the man said. "Nobody could. But I don't have to. I know where they're going. Get me a saddle and get your men up!"

A shadow fell across the shelter-half. Farrell looked up. Sergeant Whirter stood there, staring down malevolently at the prisoner. Johnny swung back to Denton.

"Let's hear what you know—all of it. I'll have to leave you here under guard. You couldn't stand an hour of the kind of riding we'll have to do!"

The prisoner put one hand up in careful exploration to a head Farrell knew must be paining him savagely.

"I couldn't direct you across the malpais if you had a week to listen to me, soldier," Denton said. "With luck I may be able to guide you. You're wasting time you can't afford. I told you, get me a saddle and get your men up!"

Farrell stared at Denton. It was patently suicide for the man to attempt to ride in his condition, yet the man's insistence had the bite of steel. Farrell glanced at his sergeant. The veteran's dark features were grim.

"He emptied four of our saddles," he growled. "Let him fill one now, if he's so set on it. I'd as soon watch him die that way as any other!"

Farrell shrugged and rose. "Pass the word, Sergeant; prepare to mount. Bring up an extra horse for the prisoner and abandon the others."

"Even the supply packs?"

Farrell glanced at Denton. The man nodded.

"Even the supply packs," Farrell agreed.

Chapter Four

Malpais Test

WHEN the sun was at zenith, Farrell called a halt almost exactly between the pair of low buttes Denton had pointed out as they left the Sink. The heat was unbearable. The black obsidian of the malpais over which they had ridden all morning was scorified by weather action but still remained deceptively smooth and slippery. Twice members of the troop, attempting to maintain the driving pace their prisoner insisted upon, had been thrown wickedly by the stumbling of their mounts on the treacherous footing. And in spite of its pitted surface, the rock was a mirror which cast back the sun's rays with redoubled force. Farrell's dozen troopers showed signs of their struggle with the relentless heat. But the incredible man in the party was the prisoner.

The makeshift bandage Farrell had applied to Denton's head was stained with a fresh flow of blood. His face was drawn and of the gray pallor of death. He rode loosely hunched forward in his saddle, bearing no weight on his stirrups and looking constantly on the point of reeling from his insecure seat. With the others, his horse had also stumbled, but some grim will had kept him from falling.

Knowing the man to be a thief and an enemy, Farrell felt grudging admiration for Denton's physical courage. This noon halt was actually for him. When the troop pulled gratefully up, the man sat almost lifelessly hunched for a brace of moments, breathing swiftly and shallowly. Whirter, whose hatred for Denton had not lessened, nevertheless felt obliged to make some gesture and crossed to him with one hand lifted in an offer to help him alight. Denton waved him away and spoke impatiently to Farrell, his voice no more than a harsh whisper.

"How much of a start did they have?"

"About four hours, I think," Farrell answered. "It took us all of that long to get back to the ferry, swim across, and get down to where you landed our wagons."

Lee Denton swore. "What we sitting here for, then? We've gotten all we could out of these horses and we haven't picked up more than an hour, yet. Damn it, man, Mexico's off there to the south. If they get to the border, you'll never see those wagons. Let's get moving!"

Farrell grinned crookedly at the men, his admiration turning vocal.

"If all rebels were as sandy as you, Denton, this is one war that'd never end! Don't you realize you're dying, man? Does the South mean that much to you?"

"Like hell I'm dying!" Denton rasped. "Not yet. And get this straight—I'm not Rebel. The South doesn't mean any more to me than the North does!"

Farrell didn't believe this. His smile grew mocking.

"No? Then why are you killing yourself? You're our prisoner, but there's no way on earth we could make you take us across this malpais if you didn't want to!"

"You're dead set on talking when we should be riding, aren't you?" Denton

grunted. "I suppose we got to get this settled. There's three men and an Indian ahead of us. One of them put a bullet into me and the others trailed with him. They're going to pay for that. I don't need any other reason for riding with you. Now, let's get moving!"

Farrell shook his head in persisting disbelief. There was a war in the nation and a man had to be on one side or the other. In a war a man didn't follow personal quarrels. He hauled for one side or the other, but he didn't hoe his own garden patch. Either this Lee Denton was lying or he was a thorough renegade.

Puzzled, Farrell grunted an order to Whirter. The troop lined out southward again, strung out behind Johnny Farrell and the wounded man who rode beside him.

Silence hung over the party except for the grunting of the heat-burdened, laboring horses and the ring of their steel shoes against the glassy obsidian footing. After half an hour Lee Denton straightened in his saddle and reined closer to Farrell, pointing ahead.

"This sun is hell!" he croaked. "See that lowest notch in the horizon?"

Farrell eyed the sag in the low blue line ahead and nodded.

"Bear straight into it," Denton went on. "I'm getting a mite fuzzy. I'll stick with you, but you may not get too much sense out of me now and then. If I'm out when you get into that notch, do something to bring me around and I'll tell you where to go from there."

Farrell nodded again. Denton's head lowered. He gripped the pommel of his saddle with both hands and braced himself slackly against the motion of his horse.

Twice in the next hour Farrell's prisoner lurched heavily forward in his saddle, spilling almost out of his seat, catching himself unsteadily only in the nick of time. The second time he reined up and signaled weakly to Whirter.

"Lash me in," he ordered.

The sergeant glanced at Farrell, got a nod of approval, and tied the man securely to leather. They moved on in a sunlighted nightmare. And of them all, after this second stop, only Lee Denton seemed impervious to the torment. Unashamedly resigning the task of keeping his seat on his mount to the ropes which bound him in place, he rode bent far over, lips partly open and caked with the heat, face without color, body apparently without feeling. By midafternoon, Johnny Farrell had come to envy him. This malpais was the gate to hell.

Another horse fell, carrying its rider with it. Before the threshing animal could be quieted, the trooper beneath it had been broken like a twig. There was not even any loose rock to gather for a cairn. The party rode stonily on, leaving horse and rider where they had fallen. Canteens were raised freely in the glaring heat until Denton momentarily appeared to regain consciousness. He roused and fixed an accusing, red-eyed stare on Johnny Farrell.

"What kind of soldier are you?" he rasped. "It's better than a hundred miles to water, the way we're going! You want to do the last fifty bone-dry?"

His head lowered without waiting for an answer and he sank at once back into the kind of coma which seemed to be his defense against the heat. Farrell smarted under the acid in the man's manner. He had no choice.

"We'll ration water," he barked at the others. "No more till sundown!"

Canteens were sullenly lowered and

under his watchful eyes their covers were buttoned down. Whirter pulled up from the main body of the detachment to pull in on Farrell's off-side, opposite Denton. The heat appeared to have evaporated all recognition of rank from the veteran.

"Don't be a fool, Farrell!" he growled. "It's a trap—can't you see that? And we're into it far enough, now!"

"If you've got something to say, Sergeant, say it!"

"What good does rationing water do?" Whirter went on doggedly. "You heard him say we got a hundred miles of this desert. Can you water horses from canteens—or do you think our animals can last that far without water? I tell you, we're being tricked into a place where we'll be set down afoot in the middle of this furnace. The rest of the boys know it, too. Let's turn back while we got a chance!"

Denton's bent body straightened slowly on the other side of Farrell as though he was lifting himself to reality from a great distance. A faint smile, wholly without humor, pulled at his cracked lips.

"You want that silver, don't you, Sergeant?" he asked.

"We'll never get it delivered on east if we're dead!" Whirter snapped.

"If you're not man enough to cross this malpais, you'll never get it!" Denton said mercilessly. Then, as though there was no more to be said, his body sagged forward again.

"We'll continue on until sundown, at least, Sergeant," Farrell said quietly.

Whirter's iron jaw thrust out angrily. "I can cross any country a wounded renegade thief and a thick-headed, fuzz-whiskered shavetail can cross!" he swore. "But you're asking too much of the boys. They'll need handling!"

"They'll get it, then," Johnny Farrell said with an unaccustomed firmness. "Some of them are lagging. Bunch them up, Sergeant. We've got to stick together."

Whirter dropped back sullenly. Farrell saw him speak to a youngster who was trailing all the others. The sun-reddened trooper rose a little in his stirrups, unhung his canteen, and savagely swung it by its lanyard at Whirter, defiantly shouting something. The others halted and Farrell reined quickly about, riding back. Whirter made no protest to the trooper but mockingly watched Farrell. The trooper's attention also shifted to his officer. He started fumbling with the buttons on his canteen cover. Two or three of the others furtively began to do likewise.

The sun pounding against Johnny Farrell's skull set up a merciless echoing within it. He knew that although no man in his command had yet suffered enough from the heat to be unbalanced by it, they too were feeling this pounding. The young trooper's defiance was dangerous. It could grow to madness and spread to the others. He rode up within half a dozen yards of the man.

"You heard my order; put that canteen up!" he barked.

The trooper glared recklessly at him, his fingers still stripping the cover from the canteen.

"The hell with you, too, Lieutenant!" he snarled. "I'm dry!"

Farrell drew his sidearm. He cocked it slowly.

"Stow that canteen!" he repeated quietly.

The trooper ignored the order and drew the cork from the container. Oth-

ers, heartened by his boldness, were working covers free.

"Stow that canteen!" Farrell said again. The boy raised it and tilted its neck against his lips for answer. The bark of Farrell's gun was nearly as flat and dispassionate as his voice had been.

The trooper lowered the canteen with a look of stupid surprise. The container fell from his hands, its contents gurgling into the thirsty earth at his horse's feet. He saw the blood on the saddle before him. His eyes lifted in disbelief to Farrell.

"Oh hell, now, Lieutenant—" he breathed in protest. The words choked off. He tilted sidewise from his saddle and fell heavily.

The balance of the troopers were suddenly not busy with their canteens. Only Sergeant Whirter, white-faced, seemed near further outburst. Farrell checked this quietly.

"We'll have a water ration at sunset," he said steadily. "Shoot the next man who lifts a canteen before then, Sergeant. Troop, forward!"

Farrell reined about again, sick and shaken. It was hell to be in command of men. Water should not be as dear as a man's life, yet here on the desert, with a fortune for the Northern treasury at stake, it was even more dear. And an officer in the service of his government had to do many things he could not do as a man.

As he came abreast of Denton at the head of the loose column again, his prisoner's head lifted a little and swung toward him.

"It looks like there'll be at least two of us who come up with those wagons again, Lieutenant. You and me. It'll take guts and you've got 'em!"

Farrell made no answer and Denton's chin lowered again to his breast, but the words continued to ring in Farrell's ears. It was funny that this renegade who had no loyalties should be the one man in the party who realized that a uniform could demand a terrible tribute from the man who wore it. Farrell did not look behind him. There would be more trouble. Not for a while, now, but a little later. And he would not have to look for it. It would come to him. When an officer had to turn a gun upon one of his own men, his discipline was dead, and discipline, more than water or luck or Lee Denton's guidance, would get his detachment across this endless malpais.

Chapter Five

Stubborn Men

IT WAS a full hour after sunset and the long desert twilight was darkening when Johnny Farrell again halted his detachment. Three of the horses stood heads-down and spraddle-legged, close to the end of their endurance. The men dismounted lamely, their surly attention riveted on their officer and the exposed skin of their bodies burned by the sun to the color of their tempers. Lee Denton rolled slackly against the ropes which held him in his saddle.

Without command, enlisting the aid of a trooper with a glance, Sergeant Whirter slipped the knots holding Denton and lowered him to the ground. Another trooper brought up the medical kit. Johnny Farrell eyed this cooperation curiously but said nothing. Whirter and the others withdrew. He dressed Denton's wound.

The torn flesh of the man's scalp looked progressively worse than it had in the morning beside the Sink. Farrell used much of the water remaining in his own canteen to cleanse the wound, forcing a little water between Denton's slack lips when the dressing was finished. The man's ragged breathing seemed to steady, but he didn't immediately return to consciousness. Whirter returned and squatted on his heels.

"You got your duty, Lieutenant; I got mine," he said. "Maybe this half-dead cadaver knows where he's taking us; maybe he don't. But we got to think of what's in those wagons. Headquarters has got to know we missed 'em so's another party can try stopping them further east if they slip us here. You got to do something about that!"

Farrell looked at his sergeant. Whirter was being civil about it, but he knew he was on sound ground and the civility was deceptive. Behind it lurked hatred and rank-consciousness and triumphant gloating. Lieutenant Farrell had made a mistake in his command and Whirter was going to see him suffer for it. He knew as well as Johnny himself that the mistake would mean nothing officially if they secured possession of the wagons again, but that without their precious silver cargo Johnny Farrell was done as an officer in the Union army.

"I intend to do something, Sergeant," Johnny answered. "If we haven't better news by daylight, I'm sending a courier back—"

Whirter coughed and spat onto bare rock. "By morning we'll be so far from that river behind us nobody could reach it with what water we got left. If a courier's going back, he'll have to go now. There's only four men with those wagons; do you have to risk the whole detachment to chance taking them?"

"You aim to issue my orders for me, Sergeant?"

Whirter's laugh was short and ugly. He snapped the fingers of one hand at the stripes on his sleeve.

"I can't so long as the Army measures what's sewed to a man's coat instead of what's inside of him! I've bucked and wet-nursed stiff-backed shavetails before. I'm just doing the best I can."

This complete, calculated insubordination stung but Johnny Farrell contained his anger. Whirter was on sure ground. Truth in what he said supported him. Farrell rose wearily.

"Word has to go back and what lies ahead is so chancy I won't order any man into it," he said softly. "Pass the word, Sergeant; as quickly as Denton revives enough to give further instructions, I'm pushing on after the wagons —with volunteers. The rest of the party is ordered to turn back to headquarters at once."

Whirter grinned and moved away. Farrell turned his attention to the wounded man. Finding the standard phial of whisky in the medical kit, he poured a little into Denton. The man swallowed with difficulty and a moment later opened his eyes.

"We're in the notch—or have you turned back, Lieutenant?" he whispered.

"We're in the notch."

Denton smiled faintly. "You're damned near as stubborn as I am!" he went on thinly. "Give me a few minutes more to catch my breath. We haven't got too much farther—"

Farrell gave the man the balance of the whisky in the phial and rose again. Whirter was a few yards away, stand-

ing by the heads of the three broken and exhausted horses. The balance of the troop had remounted; Farrell saw those who had been riding the exhausted animals near Whirter had replaced them with the better stock Whirter and Denton and himself had been using. Whirter made a gesture to the leading trooper and the party reined away, heading back toward the pair of buttes which had been their first marker on the long road south from the Sink. As Farrell came up to him, Whirter turned.

"Looks like I'm the only volunteer you got, Lieutenant."

"Touching loyalty, Sergeant!" Farrell growled. "I left you too much room. You sold the boys on pulling out. Why didn't you go with them?"

"That prisoner of yours is leading you right into a Rebel trap and you'll never get your hands on that silver. After coming this far and having you take that cheating son's word over mine, you think I'd pass up the chance to see you get your stiff neck bent?"

"That's why you deliberately set us afoot by letting all the good horses go with the boys?"

"Those kids have got a right to get out of this damned desert!" Whirter snapped. "Why should they fry to death somewhere between here and the river because I'm stubborn and you're letting a Johnny Reb make a fool of you?"

Farrell's mind had been ahead on the missing wagons, not traveling back with the returning troopers, and the harsh justice of Whirter's protest struck him squarely.

"We'd better start moving, Sergeant. Foot work is slow."

Whirter nodded. "I'm set. And I'm promising you one thing, Lieutenant. I don't know how long you're going to last, but your prisoner is going to find those wagons and he'll never live to toll me into a trap. Here's one Yank who's going to be on his feet one second longer than Denton, at least!"

Farrell turned with Whirter. Denton had come to his feet. He looked past them into the darkness where the rest of the detachment had vanished. He eyed the broken horses they had left behind. His eyes moved next to Whirter. Under the impact of his stare the sergeant drew his belt gun and moved toward the useless animals. Denton's voice checked him.

"Your doing, eh, Sergeant? The Army seems to make fools of two kinds of men—greenhorns trying to wear breeches and responsibilities too big for them and veterans who are too damned sure and efficient. Strip those saddles and leave the horses be. Maybe they'll have better luck than us. Maybe they'll drift to water."

The man swung away, then, starting off into the night at a shuffling stride. Johnny Farrell fell in behind him. After a moment of indecision, Whirter moved on to the horses. Farrell heard their gear hit the ground but there were no shots and presently Whirter's footfalls began to overtake him. The three of them moved on in soundless Indian file through the darkness.

Dawn was a tremendous thing rising out of the east. Johnny Farrell alone seemed aware of it. The other two, now both ahead of him, were moving with the head-down apathy of men conserving strength to the utmost. Lee Denton, reeling often for yards on end like a drunken man, had fallen repeatedly through the night. Whirter followed

close in his tracks, making no effort to save the man a fall, but always restoring him to his feet with a kind of mocking gentleness as though each time proving again his own rightness and superiority.

In the early morning hours Denton had passed through a lengthy period of delirium, talking in monotone steadiness. His talk made a number of things plain. There could be no doubt that without competent medical attention very shortly, he would die. He still seemed convinced they could yet overhaul the two fugitive wagons of silver—that he would have his chance to settle his score with his former partners. And his talk confirmed Whirter's suspicion that in the end he yet intended to get the Comstock wagons into Confederate hands, since he twice referred to a flying column of Rebel troops somewhere in the vicinity, waiting to meet the bullion shipment.

Thus, with the coming of the brassy sun and the merciless reflection of the obsidian under foot, there was added the torment of anticipating a certain trap without knowing when it would be sprung. Wondering at Lee Denton's tremendous stubbornness which kept life in his fevered body, Farrell came to share Whirter's bitter hatred for the man. But he remained still their one chance to regain the convoy with which they had left Virginia City. Increasing heat and sleeplessness and exhaustion battered Johnny Farrell's senses, but the weight of command and its responsibility lay upon him, redoubled by the knowledge of his own initial error in judgment at the crossing of the Sink, and he drove every nerve to maintain some semblance of alertness. It was he, therefore, who first saw the wagons ahead.

Chapter Six

To Hell or Glory

THE Comstock convoy stood in a small, shallow depression in a great expanse of tabled rock, hidden from sight in any direction except at close range. The wagon teams, unharnessed, were bunched in the scant shade cast by the tilts. Two men, separated by perhaps a hundred yards, sprawled in apparent sleep some distance from the little pothole of rainwater beside which the wagons stood. Two others lay close to the water.

From the rim of the depression which held the wagons, at a distance of perhaps a quarter of a mile, the scene was so clear in the morning light that it seemed unreal, more dreamed than actually seen. Johnny Farrell stared a long moment for surety and sanity before calling sharply to his shuffling companions.

"Sergeant Whirter—Denton! Down, quietly!"

Both men dropped, apparently as much out of exhaustion as obedience to the compelling authority in Farrell's voice. And as he sprawled himself down on the stone, Farrell felt overtaxed muscles of his thighs and legs continue the hallucination of monotonous forward trudging in a kind of physical hysteria.

"I've been working over this way since midnight," Lee Denton said slowly and with clearer speech than he had used since the noon stop the previous day. "The Indian said there was sometimes a little rainwater in a pothole or two over here, even this late in the year. I figured Kettleman wouldn't

travel dry if he didn't have to and he'd be easing up about now, sure he'd shaken us."

"They're sure scattered," Whirter muttered, staring fixedly down into the depression.

Denton chuckled almost soundlessly. "Kettleman and Cosgrove figured that. Two wagons and a day's drive into Mexico. Two men could handle it. Four's too many. The Indian first, then Murchison, both in the back. Murchison always was careless. That'll be Cosgrove and Kettleman, asleep by the pothole. The other two are dead. Give me a gun, Lieutenant. I've got work to do."

The responsibility of command prodded Johnny Farrell, driving his weary mind to analysis.

"We were slow seeing them. We'd been on the sky line for minutes. They'll have spotted us, for sure. Now we've got to go in against their rifles."

"I said they're sleeping. You can still see the sweat on the teams. They haven't been there more than an hour. They took care of Murch and the Indian first thing. That's all that was worrying them. The sun'll wake them directly, but they're sleeping, now. Damn it, I want a gun!"

"It would take all three of us, jumping them fast, to handle this in daylight," Sergeant Whirter said. "I doubt if I got enough go left to get down there without them being tipped off. I don't think the lieutenant could, either. And I know you couldn't. Not in daylight."

Farrell had been quietly studying the situation. He spoke carefully.

"We're too unsteady and there's too much chance one of them might wake. We'd be cut down by their rifles before we were in range. We'll have to wait for dark."

Neither of the other two made answer to this. Farrell knew what each was thinking. If anything could be more brutal than stumbling through midday heat across this malpais, to lie in enforced motionlessness on its sunblistered surface was it. Men who could remain on their feet in the desert had a chance for life. Those who lay prone invited death. And there was no possible shelter here; no movement could be risked to betray their presence. Denton finally spoke.

"So we wait for dark. I still want a gun, Lieutenant!"

Farrell didn't look at Whirter. He wormed across the rock and handed Lee Denton one of his belt guns. The man took the weapon, checked its charges, and put it a little distance from his head, where he could look at it.

"I'm going to shoot Sam Kettleman in the head," he said quietly. "Right while he's looking at me I'm going to shoot him in the head!"

His voice trailed off. Farrell saw his hands come up to silently compress the clumsy bandage about his skull, and seeing Denton's knuckles whiten with strain, he realized fully for the first time the agony the man must be enduring. For the first time he realized that often in the hours since they had left the Sink, when he had thought his prisoner was submerged in apathy or subconsciousness, Denton had actually been staging a crucial struggle against torment. The man's stubborn hatred toward his former companions was a thing to command respect if not understanding. Hatred alone was keeping Lee Denton alive.

Sergeant Whirter broke a long run of silence during which Denton's body

stirred like that of a sleeping man coping with nightmare.

"I've been thinking, Lieutenant," Whirter murmured. "If we had half a dozen of the boys, now, we could rush that pair of thieves down there. This sun's going to fry what life Denton's got right out of him. The poor devil hasn't got a chance and after the fight he's put up, it ain't hardly right—" The sergeant's voice trailed off. Finally he completed his thought. "I—I'm sorry—"

"That you suggested to the boys they all turn back?" Farrell asked. "I'm not! I only really needed one volunteer, Sergeant; I got the best one in the detachment. If I'd listened to you on the Sink, it wouldn't have taken us all night to get back across the river and we wouldn't have lost the boys we did."

The silence came again. Lee Denton's body continued to fight its fever and its agony as the morning sun increased in strength. Twice the man's hand extended to touch the gun lying at his head, seeming to find strength and reassurance in the feel of the weapon. Farrell thought the man remained conscious, but he couldn't tell. Keeping the movement to painful slowness to avoid chance detection from below, he peeled his shirt from his back and spread it to give the wounded man some protection from the overhead rays. Whirter raised his head to glare at Farrell's uncovered shoulders and arms with a look which foretold what the sun would do to them, but he said nothing.

In midmorning there was a stir at the wagons. The two men who had been sleeping roused, drank from the pothole, and liberally splashed water from it over themselves before making a brief morning meal. Farrell was acutely conscious of the torment his own dehydrated body and empty belly endured in watching them. The pitch of Lee Denton's suffering seemed to increase, whether he watched or not.

It was nearly noon when the two men below rolled into the shade under one wagon, apparently to sleep again. Lee Denton's breathing had by this time become a ragged, painful thing to hear. He had pawed away the protection of Farrell's shirt and was plainly conscious, but he made no verbal protest at this merciless wait which was killing him. Sergeant Whirter rolled close to Farrell.

"If we have luck and take those wagons back," he murmured, "and Denton's still alive, he'll try to steer us right into the Rebel bunch that hired him to jump us in the first place. I know that. Him and his cut some of our boys down, up there on the river. I know that, too. But damn it, you can't hate a man with guts! We got to do something, Lieutenant!"

Johnny Farrell nodded with a rush of relief. "If we were to circle west a few yards, we'd have the other wagon between us and the one they're sleeping under, down there—"

Whirter's dried lips cracked under his sudden grin so that blood showed on them. He crawled to Denton. Farrell helped him roll the wounded man up onto his back. Whirter began crawling westward with his burden. In fifty yards the second wagon obscured them from the sleeping pair under the first and they remained undetected. Rising to their feet, Farrell and Whirter supported Denton between them and started down the slope.

Farrell was aware of Denton's weight, of the man's faltering footsteps between them, of diminishing distance to the wagons. He was aware of the heat of the sun and the stone underfoot

and his own exhaustion. He was aware that Denton was his prisoner and his enemy. But more important than these things, he was a soldier and this was soldiering in a tradition few were privileged to know—three men bound downhill to hell or glory because they didn't know when to quit.

There was the stir of startled harness stock, a man's awakening shout of incredulous alarm, the flash of gunfire, the sting of lead ricocheting from a wagon tire to slash his cheek. A bedlam and a sudden silence and Sergeant Whirter's crooked grin over a dipper of water from the pothole. And more water, plentiful water with which to bathe the body of a fevered man under the canvas hood of one of the wagons. Water to re-dress a wound which had sloughed away much of its infection with the old bandage, a wound now hearteningly clean and less inflamed. And Sergeant Whirter crawling in under the hood with a crumpled piece of paper, incredulity in his eyes and a soldier's respect for a proven officer in his voice.

"You figure it, Sir. Found this on one of that pair. Must have taken it off of Denton when they cut him down up on the river. The rendezvous he had set with the Texas Rebs he hired to. Remember them buttes we stopped by yesterday noon? He was supposed to meet the Rebs ten miles due east of there. He could have got all the help he needed for catching these wagons from them, there. But he brung us on past the meeting-place and down here. And all the while with that head needing attention! Hell, it's less'n two days to our own Fort Wingate from here, now, and easy going. It doesn't make sense!"

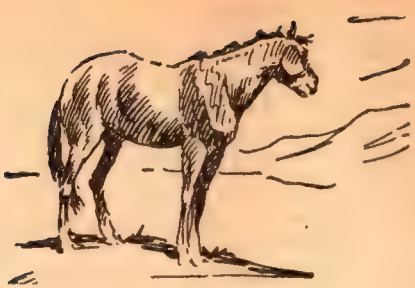
Johnny Farrell's prisoner stirred. "Why not, Sergeant?" he asked. "I made a mistake. So did the lieutenant. Why couldn't you make one about me? I guess everybody's got one mistake coming. By the time we reached the buttes and I could have turned you over to Captain Hale, I'd come to the conclusion that boys who did their own fighting instead of hiring it done by renegades might have something worth fighting for. So I decided to string along. Suppose that with this silver we can wangle somebody into signing me into your outfit when we get to Wingate?"

Sergeant Whirter grinned. Johnny Farrell grinned with him. Across the nation the course of the war was important. In Washington and Richmond the fate of a Comstock silver shipment was important. But here in this moment on the malpais of the Territories, these things counted for little. A man found comrades of his own kind too seldom.

"Where's that dipper, Sergeant?" Johnny Farrell said. "This calls for another drink!" THE END

Answers to "By Their Deeds" Quiz on page 129

1. Bill Longley
2. Jack Slade
3. John Selman
4. Ben Thompson
5. Billy the Kid
6. Wild Bill Hickok
7. John Slaughter
8. Butch Cassidy
9. Tom Horn
10. Sam Bass



EASY DOES IT

By S. Omar Barker

THEY ASKED me why a cowboy takes it easy saddlin' up
A cowhoss that appears to be as gentle as a pup.
Why don't he slap the saddle on, yank up the cinch an' go,
Instead of lacing on his kack so easy-like an' slow?
Well, folks, it ain't no secret out amongst the men who ride
That dynamite may lie asleep beneath a hoss's hide.
At least if he's a cowhoss, you can notch it on your stick
That every muscle in him has been schooled to function quick,
An' though he may be gentle as a well fed kitten is,
His gizzard's full of ginger an' his spirit's full of spizz.
He bucked when he was busted. Now he's tame, an' like as not
He sure don't aim to pitch no more; but still he ain't forgot
That he's a hoss redblooded an' entitled to respect.
The cowboy understands this, which is why he don't neglect
To throw the saddle on him with a firm but gentle swing
Instead of flappin' leather like a buzzard on the wing.
That sure don't mean the pony ain't aware of who is boss,
Nor that the cowboy is afraid he's got a spooky hoss.
For prob'ly, if he had to, he could slap the saddle on
In less than half a jiffy, step across him and be gone
A whole lot quicker than he does, without no bad reaction.
Instead he takes it easy, for he knows the satisfaction
Of handlin' hosses quiet so they learn to like an' trust you,
An' do their best to please instead of r'ar around an' bust you.
They asked me why a cowpoke saddles up with quiet care:
It's partly just a cowboy trait to treat his pony fair.
He may not ever pet him none, nor pamper him nor sugar him,
But if the hoss is fit to ride, it don't make sense to booger him!

Free-for-All

WILLIAM MacLEOD RAINE'S "To Ride the River With," featured in magazine-abridgment form in this issue of ZGWM, is one of over seventy books by the dean of America's Western-story writers. Of this total, sixty-odd are novels of the West. The list continues to grow as Mr. Raine goes on turning out one a year (he used to do two a year but at the age of seventy-eight he feels justified in taking life a mite easier). His most recent, "The Bandit Trail," shows that he is still at the top of the heap when it comes to rousing straight-action Westerns.

Born in London of Scots parentage, Bill Raine came to America with his father and three brothers when he was ten, to settle on an Arkansas fruit farm. The elder Raine soon became interested in the cattle business, and young Bill began to absorb the beef-critter savvy that he has put into many a book. When the Raines moved to Washington state, Bill, an Oberlin graduate, became a rural schoolteacher. A few years of knowledge-mongering proved all he could stand and he became a reporter on the Seattle *Times*. Newspaper work suited him fine and when ill health made him seek Colorado's high-country climate he went to work for the Denver *Republican*. Copious spare-time reading finally led him to try spinning a yarn of his own, and the result was published in *Munsey's* in 1899. His first book, a cloak-and-sword romance, appeared in 1901 and his first Western novel, "Wyoming," in 1906. Three of his books are widely used as reference works: *Famous Sheriffs and Western Outlaws*, *Guns of the Frontier*, and (with Will C. Barnes as co-author) *Cattle*.

Now one of Denver's leading citizens, Raine has wandered widely over the West, meeting and talking with many of the men who have made six-gun history. From these experiences he has fashioned an article on famous gunmen he has known, soon to appear in ZANE GREY'S WESTERN MAGAZINE.

● Tom W. Blackburn's novelette, "Silver for Old Abe," dramatizes an often overlooked facet of the Civil War. Comstock Lode metal contributed modestly to the North's victory; Nevada's contribution was more important politically, for the scantily peopled Territory was awarded statehood by a war-

minded Congress in 1864—just in time to swell Lincoln's electoral-college majority and to help ratify the controversial Thirteenth (emancipation) Amendment.

● "Trouble Man," Thomas Thompson's fine short story, will probably have you readers yelling for more—and we're set to satisfy the anticipated demand with a brace of his yarns. Watch for "Law Badge" and "Know My Name," both slated for early publication. Your editors can report, by the way, that Tommy's first book, *Range Drifter*, published by Doubleday, is well worth reading.

● The Paintin' Pistoleer meets up with plenty trouble, as usual, in "Editor-in-Grief," though it's Inky McKrimp who finally takes it on the chin—or somewhere. Serves him right, too, him being downright careless thataway!

● Edwin L. Sabin has done many exciting fact pieces, but "Road Agents' Bonanza" ranks well up with his best.

● Nick Firfires is back this month with an eye-opening front-cover job—hard to beat feminine appeal, even when it's behind a smoking six! And Frances Eckart's back-cover painting demonstrates the feminine touch from another angle; the Chicago gal knows her horses.

● The Dell Book 25c reprint series has added two outstanding Western-action titles: *Gunsmoke Graze*, by Peter Dawson, and *Silent in the Saddle*, by Norman A. Fox, both now available on the newsstands.

● A new book by Ross Santee is always an exciting event. His recently published *The Bubbling Spring* (Scribner's) lives up to all expectations. Seldom enough does a Western novel approach the status of real literature, as this one does. It's a volume to read and keep and treasure.

Coming next month: a magazine abridgment of "Nevada," by Zane Grey, with a grand line-up of other stories and articles (see page 2).

—THE EDITORS.

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Subscriptions received by December 20 start with the February issue; those received after December 20 start with the March issue.

GILA MONSTER

THE GILA MONSTER of our Southwest, the only known poisonous lizard, is a good creature to steer clear of. Even the coloration of this evil-tempered brute is of poisonous hue, mottled orange or pink and black. It drags its thick body slowly over the sand, as though saving its strength for its lightninglike attacks—this usually sluggish reptile will strike with unbelievable speed and savagery at any moving object entering its field of vision. The powerful jaws grind and lacerate, driving the venomous fangs deep. The venom is similar in composition to that of poisonous snakes, and the bite is sometimes fatal to man. The wound should be treated like a snakebite. Prying this ugly fellow's jaws from its victim may well defy a man's strength. Shooting will not turn the trick, for the monster's grip is viselike even in death. Usually a heavy pair of pliers is the best tool for the purpose. In captivity the Gila monster may become quite docile, allowing itself to be handled without show of temper, but once turned loose in the bright sun it quickly reverts to its former savage nature.

EARL SHERWAN

READING SIGN Painted by Frances Eckart